



The Portrayal of the Main Character's Trauma in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022)

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ABSTRACT

Trauma has an important relation to psychology, anthropology and sociology, history, war, and more significantly, literature. This research explores the portrayal of trauma in the young adult literature novel titled *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) by Zoulfa Katouh. The novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) focuses on the issue of the Syrian Civil War which becomes the main reason for the main character's trauma. By using the qualitative research method, this research aims to discover the portrayal of trauma by the main character in the narrative. Caruth's theory of trauma (1996) is used to discover the portrayal of trauma as a response to the main character's catastrophic event in the story. The findings show two kinds of trauma symptoms that is portrayed by the main character which are hallucinations and panic attacks. However, panic attacks are not significantly explained in the Caruth's (1996) theory of trauma. The research shows that factors such as death, loss, war, terror, and political violence caused by the government are the main reasons behind the main character's trauma. The research significantly explores how fiction is used to understand trauma based on the main character's behavior.

Keywords: hallucinations; literature portrayal; psychology; trauma

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INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil War involves the Syrian Arab Republic, which is ruled by Bashar Al-Assad and supported by domestic and foreign allies, against various domestic and foreign parties that oppose the Syrian government. This war caused approximately 470,000-610,000 violent deaths which made it the second deadliest conflict of the twenty-first century. Moreover, with millions of people fleeing to neighbouring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Germany; the war has caused a major refugee crisis. The war's enormous impact has impacted many works of literature and one of them is *As Long as Lemon Trees Grow* (2022).

The novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* addresses a story about war, loss, family, and love. The main theme of this book is hope, how one believes there is hope in

madness. However, this book also portrays a trauma issue faced by the main character, Salama. Salama is an 18-year-old Muslim who was studying pharmacy when the Syrian Civil War and Syrian Revolution breaks were at their peak. She knows that her life was disintegrated when she lost her family, her home, and her freedom before her very eyes. In a few days, she went from a pharmacy student to a surgeon in one of the hospitals in Homs when she became one of the volunteers in that hospital. She treats the Syrian martyrs who survived sniper attacks and chemical warfare as well as other violence committed against them by the Syrian government. The cruelty and destruction brought by the government she saw through her patients and her loss are the reasons why the story contains trauma issues. In addition, the novel *As Long as Lemon Trees Grow*

(2022) by Zoulfa Katouh has been chosen as the British Book Award Nominee for Discover (2023) and Goodreads Choice Award Nominee for Young Adult Fiction (2022).

According to Caruth (1996), trauma is a towering experience of abrupt or catastrophic events which leads to the unruly emergence of hallucinations and other meddling phenomena. Trauma emerges from different events such as sexual abuse, child abuse, industrial accidents, political violence, loss, etc. Political violence not only terrorizes through actual injury or fear but also traumatizes by inscribing the memory of violence in the bodies of its victims (Humphrey, 2000).

Heidarzadeh (2015) stated that at the interdisciplinary level, trauma has a significant relation to psychology, anthropology and sociology, world history, war, politics, and more importantly literature. There are many previous studies that analysed trauma in different contexts. For example, the analysis of trauma, process, and representation by Levine H.B. (2021), the analysis of trauma and the politic of emotions by Hutchison, E. (2010), trauma as a public health issue by Magruder, K. M., McLaughlin, K. A., and Elmore Borbon, D. L. (2017).

Trauma in the field of literature also has been studied in much research. A significant role of trauma in the field of literature and psychoanalysis can be found in the analysis of the representation of trauma in Fatima Bhutto's Narrative by Shah, A., Riaz, H., Sajjad. U., and Ahmad, S. (2021). This research explores the traumatized psychological attitudes and behaviours of fictional characters in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) and *The Runaways* (2018). Another research that also analyses trauma in literature is the representation of trauma and healing in *Solar Storms* (2012) by Irene S. Vernon which explores the representation of trauma and healing in *Solar Storms*. In young adult literature, there is only little research that explores the portrayal of trauma. For example, the analysis of trauma recovery in young adult literature by Gyurisin, J. L. (2004). The research by Gyusirin, J. L. focuses on trauma recovery in young adult literature *Little Red Cap* and *Snow White* by the Brothers Grimm. From the research above, there is only a little research that explores the portrayal of trauma in young

adult literature especially in the novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*. Thus, this study will explore the portrayal of trauma in the book *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) by Zoulfa Katouh.

This research will focus on understanding the portrayal of trauma that is faced by Salama, the main character in the narrative. In developing this analysis, the writer seeks to fill the gap that emerged from the previous study. This present study aims to understand how trauma is portrayed by the main character in the novel *As Long as Lemon Trees Grow* (2022). This analysis will be using qualitative approach with the theory of trauma by Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996).

METHOD

This research used qualitative study to discover the portrayal of the main character's trauma in the novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022). According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research is a research process that explores an issue related to society or humanity by using distinct methodological approaches as its foundation. However, the data of this research were taken from a novel. Therefore, this research also used Catherine Belsey's textual analysis (2013) to achieve the aims of the research.

The data source from this research was taken from the novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) by Zoulfa Katouh. The novel addresses a story about hope, war, loss, family, and love. The main character from the story is an 18-year-old girl named Salama who works as one of the volunteers in the hospital in Homs, Syria. She treats the Syrian martyrs who survived the Syrian government's cruelty. She lost everyone she loved because of the Government's brutality. Because of the catastrophic events she faced, her trauma emerges and it leads to the unruly emergence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.

Further, several processes were carried out to collect and analyze the data. First, the writer read the novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) by Zoulfa Katouh. Second, the writer marked some parts of the novel that carried the issues of trauma portrayed by the main character. Third, the writer analysed the selected parts of the novel by using the

theory of trauma Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Finally, the data was represented logically from the most salient to the least salient one.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter contains the findings and discussion of the research. It includes the events that evoke Salama's trauma and the portrayal of trauma by Salama, the main character of the novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022). Some of the findings are determined by using Caruth's (1996) theory of trauma. However, some of the findings are not significantly discussed in Caruth's (1996) theory. Although some of the findings are not discussed in Caruth's theory, they are interesting and caused by Salama's catastrophic events.

The Story Behind Salama's Trauma

Salama, the main character of the novel, was living a peaceful life with her family. Her life was filled with joy as she was living with her mama, her baba, and Layla, her sister, who was just married to a man named Hamza. Her life was perfect until the government took everything she had "I lost everything last July. All in the span of one week." (Katouh, 2022, p. 15). She lost everything that day. She lost her family, her home, and her dream in a government raid.

Her mama's death was very tragic. It gave Salama tremendous pain that damaged her both physically and mentally. The Syrian government dropped bombs in her neighborhood and one of the bombs hit her home and killed her mama. She witnessed her mama's death before her very eyes. She could not do anything, the bombs damaged her physically "She coughs, her clothes and hijab torn, trying to crawl to her Mama's corpse before her muscle give way, and she falls to the ground, unconscious" (Katouh, 2022, p. 26). Her father and brother who were known as revolutionaries did not die on that day. Both of them were taken and placed in the Jail. However, Salama believed that death is way more merciful than being taken by the government. The Syrian government tortured the revolutionaries in a very violent way.

She and her pregnant sister-in-law, Layla, were the only ones from her family who survived the government raid. After the raid,

Salama became one of the volunteers at the hospital in Homs where she was saved by a doctor named Ziad. Before the raid, she was studying pharmacy which made her familiar with handling patients at the hospital. However, she was never deal with heavy surgery, especially with unmaintainable equipment. Salama handled many Syrian martyrs who are suffering from sniper, bomb, and chemical attacks from the Syrian government. The victims of the Syrian Government's brutality reminded her the event that took away her joyful life.

These fatal events evoked Salama's trauma. Her loss on the raid itself is enough to emerge trauma and working in the hospital just made it even worse. These catastrophic events she faced made her hallucinate and brought Khawf and Layla into her existence.

Khawf was the personification of Salama's trauma. He was portrayed as something that looks quite like human but he did not look like human "He looks as close as human as can try to be" (Katouh, 2022, p. 14). He was a hallucination that has stayed in Salama's mind ever since she lost her mama.

Later that day, when Khawf appeared and told me his name, it took me a bit for me to realise I was the only one seeing him at first, I thought the drugs were giving me visions ... Even when the pain subsided, and my ribs healed, and my hands scarred, he didn't leave. (Katouh, 2022, p. 16).

Layla is Salama's sister-in-law. Layla married Hamza, Salama's brother, and was pregnant when the Syrian government raid happened. She was the one who calmed Salama when she started to panic or when she had a bad day in the Hospital. Layla is the main reason why Salama wanted to leave Homs. As mentioned before, Salama made a promise to Hamza to take care of Layla and her baby. But apparently, Layla was already dead. She got shot by a military sniper when Salama was in the hospital. Layla was buried on the very same day as she got shot. Salama knew it. In fact, she was the one who did the Layla burial.

"I was at the hospital when it happened. Layla died without me there to hold her hand ... She was walking back from the supermarket when military bullet went through her

head ... Layla's burial was hurried, that very same day. (Katouh, 2022, p. 307).

Although she was the one who did Layla's burial, she was still in pain because of her mama's death and it made her forget about Layla's death. Therefore, the next day she saw Layla sitting on her bed "I woke up the next day to find her sitting on my bed with her cheeky grin and I ... Forgot" (Katouh, 2022, p.307). She believed that Layla was alive until Kenan, her husband, saw she was talking with no one in her house as he said "There's no Layla. I can't see her" (Katouh, 2022, p. 305) and she finally remembered what happened.

Portrayals of Trauma by Salama

Trauma in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* is portrayed by Salama through hallucination and the way she reacted to some events she faced. As mentioned before, her trauma brings Layla and Khawf into her life and she is able to interact with them. However, the triggers of each hallucination are different.

Salama's Hallucinations

Throughout the story, Salama's interactions with Khawf and Layla are very different. However, both hallucinations function the same. They emerge to help Salama continue her journey.

Khawf appears anytime and anywhere he wants, even when Salama is not alone. He appears when Salama is having a conversation with Kenan "Khawf appears in the corner of my eyes, but I refuse to look at his direction ..." (Katouh, 2022, p. 243). This shows that the occurrence of Khawf is unruly and it reflects Caruth's claim that the occurrence of hallucinations as the response to catastrophic events are often delayed and unruly (Caruth, 1996). However, the emergence of Khawf is not delayed since he emerges a day after.

Khawf is Salama's trauma personification that actually helps her to leave Homs. It is part of Salama's mind that wants to leave Homs and looks for her happiness. However, Salama has a conflict of interest because Homs is her neighborhood. Her ambition is to help the Martyrs of Syria in her area. Therefore, Khawf emerges and he reminds her of her catastrophic events and it constrains her to leave Homs. This statement

is strengthened by the part where every time Salama hesitates to leave Syria, Khawf threatens her by saying "I will tear your world apart" (Katouh, 2022, p. 18).

Khawf always convinces Salama to leave Homs by mentioning her promise to Hamza. Salama promised Hamza that if he did not come back, she would take care of Layla and her baby. Khawf uses Salama's promise to force her to leave Homs because that is the only thing to keep Layla and her baby safe. He possesses the ability to control Salama's mind by snapping his fingers. He uses this ability to manipulate Salama's mind if Salama tries to rebel against him. For instance, when Salama tells Khawf that it is hard to leave Homs because the price is too high, he responds by manipulating Salama's mind and showing her memory of her mama's death "This memory – 'he straightens, smirking – 'should solidify your decision. Before I scream, he snaps his fingers." (Katouh, 2022, p. 19). Not only Khawf can recall Salama's catastrophic tragedy, but he is also able to manipulate Salama's mind by showing possibilities that can happen if she does not leave Homs. He shows Salama the portrayal of dying Layla "He snaps his finger and Layla is sprawled on the floor beside my bed. Blood seeps into the floorboards, and she twitches." (Katouh, 2022, p.195).

Khawf's ability to manipulate Salama's mind made him dominate Salama in their interactions. For instance, when Salama treated a kid who happened to be the daughter of Am, a guy who sells a boat "ticket", Salama was told by Khawf to threaten Am so that Am could give her boat tickets for her and Layla. As a pharmacist, Salama was aware that it was the wrong thing to do, but she could not do anything since Khawf was the one who asked for it. Salama ripped out a gauze and pressed it in Am's daughter's open wound on her neck as she said "Give me a boat or ... or I remove my hands" (Katouh, 2022, p. 132). This shows that even though Salama did not want to threaten Am, she still did it because of her fear of her traumatic experiences brought by Khawf.

Salama understands that Khawf is only her hallucination. However, she introduces Khawf to Kenan as the response to her head injury and her PTSD "... maybe a head injury coupled with my PTSD has affected the

relationship between my brain's frontal lobe and sensory cortex ..." (Katouh, 2022, p. 278). Although she is aware that Khawf is only her hallucination, she still cannot fight him because he is part of her mind and she actually wants to leave Homs. This idea is strengthened by the fact that Khawf disappeared after she finally arrived in Germany "And while Khawf has disappeared from my life like a fever dream" (Katouh, 2022, p. 410).

However, Salama's patriotic side thought it was a shame to leave the Country. Therefore, Khawf emerges to push Salama's decision to leave Homs. Salama needs Khawf to force her to leave Homs. Salama has faced many traumatic events in Homs and if she stayed, she would never find her happiness as Khawf said "This place is imbued with your trauma. Do you see why you need to leave, Salama?" (Katouh, 2022, p. 270) and Salama responded it with a quick nod. This evidence shows that Salama agreed with Khawf but she thought that this reason was not reasonable enough for her to leave Homs. Consequently, Khawf was there to push Salama's attempt to leave Homs and find her happiness. Although Khawf seems like the antagonist of the story, Salama needs him. If Khawf had not pushed Salama, she perhaps would have died because of the Government brutality.

Another hallucination Salama brings into her existence is Layla. Salama's hallucination of Layla is very different compared to Khawf. Khawf can appear wherever he wants while Layla can only be seen by Salama in their home. Layla can't even attend Salama's marriage at the hospital. She told Salama that she is not feeling well and Layla said "Salama, I really want to come.' She squeezes my hand. 'I would crawl if I could, but I can't even do that now" (Katouh, 2022, p. 287). But it was just a false excuse. The reason why can't attend Salama's wedding is because she is just a hallucination that only Salama can see. She can only be seen in their home because that was the place where Salama and Layla mostly spent time together.

As mentioned before, Khawf emerges as a response to her loss. It is Salama's response to leaving Homs and finding her new happiness. Meanwhile, Layla is emerging as the response to her regret that she was not on Layla's side when she died and the fact that Layla is the only person she has in her

world. Salama needs someone who can keep her feeling comfortable and safe and the only person who can give that was Layla at that moment. Consequently, she creates a false reality about Layla. In addition, her guilt toward Hamza just makes it worse. She can't keep her promise to take care of Layla and her baby.

This situation reflects what Caruth (1996) mentioned that the effects of certain accidents are not apparent because the victim of the crash was unconscious during the accident. Even though she was the one who did Layla's burial, she was doing it subconsciously. She was never fully conscious that her mind couldn't fully comprehend the situation. Therefore, the next day she believes Layla is still alive, she said "I Woke up the next day to find her sitting on my bed with her cheeky grin and I ... forgot. No. I changed reality" (Katouh, 2022, p. 308). Kenan finally brings her memories to her mind. Rather than accepting the fact that Layla is already dead, she forgets it. By forgetting the accident, she omits her guilty feelings to Hamza and acts like nothing happened. What she did to respond to Layla's death is indicated as what Freud mentioned in Caruth (1996) that the victim of the accident is unharmed due to not being fully conscious during the accident.

The presumption that Salama forgot Layla's death because of her regret, needs, and guilt feelings towards Hamza is strengthened by Salama's confession when she realizes that Layla is only her hallucination. She stops sobbing, a heavy pain hits her chest as she talks to herself:

For Five Months my mind has spinning a fiction to keep my agony sealed away. I gaze at her face, trying to commit her to memory. I needed her in my life. I needed that comfort and safety after I lost my whole world. ... I know I'm owed so much, so I forged my own might life. She let me heal bit by bit. She's as real to me as anything. (Katouh, 2022, p. 308)

This evidence shows that Salama needs Layla in her life since her world was destroyed. Salama regrets that she can't be on Layla's side when Layla gets shot by the military. Layla is the one who keeps her comfort and safety. Hence, Salama feels she owes Layla very much that she has not paid Layla back for what she did.

Other Effects Trauma

In building this research, the writer found an interesting finding about Salama. Salama often panics when she faces events that remind her of her traumatic events. For instance, when she heard a thunderous noise, her heart lodged in her throat for several beats as she said "Please, God, let it be nothing. Let it not be a raid! Please!" (Katouh, 2022, p. 48). This evidence shows that Salama had a panic attack just because she heard a thunderous noise that reminded her of her traumatic events when her neighborhood got raided by the government. Another example is when the government attacked the hospital by using a chemical gas. When she remembered that Kenan's brother and sister were in the next neighborhood she panicked and murmured "Oh God, please don't let his neighborhood be affected" (Katouh, 2022, p. 241). She tried to summon rational thought, she tried to make a positive thought that if they got affected, they would have been brought to the hospital until she realized what if they died before they arrived at the hospital and she started to panic again.

Those events show that Salama cannot lose another person that is close to her. Although Kenan's brother and sister are not that close to her, Salama does not have anyone but Layla, and the fact she is attracted to Kenan is also the reason why she feels close to them. There is a part in the novel when Salama scolded Kenan for recording the government's brutality and said it would affect her because she was the one who brought Kenan to the hospital. Although she said so, she was worried for Kenan's safety as she said:

"... 'You think that's what I care about?' 'You can't do this.' The words spill out of me like a broken dam, each one tripping over and the other. 'You can't record the protests anymore because I swear to God, Kenan, if you get arrested – If you die – I will never forgive you!" (Katouh, 2022, p. 275).

Kenan was supposed to be her spouse. Salama was betrothed to Kenan before her neighborhood was raided by the government. After being separated for a long time, Salama and Kenan met again and she fell in love with him. Kenan came into Salama's life and He

gave Salama's life new colors and dreams. Therefore, she also feels like she has a family connection with Kenan's brother and sister. Consequently, she panicked when she felt a bad thing was about to happen to them.

The way Salama deals with her panic attacks is also interesting. If she is by herself, she will murmur things that make her happy. In this case, she will murmur some types of flowers such as daisies, tulips, and others. When she was talking to Kenan, she felt Khawf's presence and she murmured "Daisies. Sweet-smelling daisies. White Petals. Yellow centres." (Katouh, 2022, p. 141). She did this because those flowers are the things that make her happy. She hopes her anxiety will be gone if she thinks about something that makes her happy. This presumption is strengthened when she feels bad about Am after threatening him and then she asks Kenan to say something good. Kenan looked confused but he still told Salama about his favorite show titled *Castle in the Sky* by Studio Ghibli. Salama asked Kenan to tell her something good and hoped that by hearing it she would receive happiness from Kenan's story. This shows that Salama was missing the feeling of being happy and it becomes the reason why Khawf is emerging and "haunts" her so that she can find her new happiness.

However, those findings are not mentioned in Caruth's (1996) *Unclaimed Experience*. The theory by Caruth mostly talks about the bigger effects of Trauma such as hallucinations, the latency of traumatic events, trauma in dreams, and others. Although these findings are not explained in Caruth's trauma theory, these findings indeed happened as an effect of Salama's trauma.

Discussion

The novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) talks about the trauma faced by the characters in this novel. The internal war between the revolutionaries and the government caused many catastrophic events faced by the people who live in Syria and it evokes their trauma. The war hurts the people both mentally and physically. Salama's mother death is caused by the war and it evokes Salama's trauma. Salama's trauma portrayed through her hallucinations and panic attacks that is shown in the story. These things happened because of her loss and

trauma because of the war between the revolutionaries and the government as well as the brutality of the government. The hallucinations faced by Salama are different. The hallucination of Khawf is unruly while the hallucination of Layla is static. However, these hallucinations are not delayed which is the opposite of what Caruth mentioned in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) that the response to catastrophic events is often delayed, uncontrolled hallucinations.

These findings on loss and trauma because of the brutality of war bring similarities to the research conducted by Shah, A. (2021) where the characters in the novel *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) and *The Runaways* (2018) evoke their trauma because of the brutality that happens in a war. However, rather than letting her life sink in the pain and sorrow because of the Trauma, she tried to fight it by moving into a different place where she could forget about her traumatic experiences. The way Salama “runs” to deal with her trauma is similar to what Heidarizadeh N. (2015) found in her research where the main character no longer wants to be dominated and controlled by the Hunter in Atwood’s novel. Although the Hunters in Atwood’s Novel and Khawf play different roles in the story, the main characters in both stories do the same thing which is reject being victimized by them and fight their trauma to free themselves from it. After conducting this research, the writer found dissimilarities between this research and Gyurisn J. L. (2004) where the narratives Little Red Cap and Snow White are focused more on the trauma recovery rather than the trauma itself. The Novel *As Long as Lemon Trees Grow* focuses more on the trauma and its effects on Salama. The novel represents how traumatic events affect Salama’s mental health to the point where she starts to hallucinate and how she deals with it.

This research focuses on how catastrophic events affect someone’s psyche. This research claims that the hallucinations caused by catastrophic events are different to Caruth’s (1996) which claims that hallucinations are often delayed, and unruly hallucinations. The hallucinations experienced by the main character are not delayed, it happened a day after the tragedy. However, the Khawf and Layla hallucinations mentioned

before indicate that trauma in literature can be studied by using Caruth (1996).

CONCLUSION

This research aims to explore the trauma portrayed by the Main Character in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) by Zoulfa Katouh. It focuses on how trauma is portrayed by Salama, the main character of the story, and how she deals with it. The trauma is portrayed through the hallucinations she experiences throughout the story. The hallucinations of interacting with Khawf and Layla function to help Salama continue her journey. Layla helped her continue her journey to throw away her guilty feelings towards Hamza. Meanwhile, Khawf helped Salama’s journey by forcing her to leave Homs and her traumatic experience behind.

The novel As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow tells issues of how the victims of war are impacted by the war brutality. The narrative holds issues of how terror and loss experienced by the victims of war evoke their trauma and lead into the occurrence of hallucinations and other unwanted behavior faced by the victims of Syrian Civil War. This research focused on the impact of losing the loved ones traumatizing individuals to the point where they start hallucinating. Future studies can explore the relationship of trauma and recovery in young adult literatures. The study can also focus in understanding the historical trauma in literary works.

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