

**TRAUMA – THEN AND NOW IN ELIE WIESEL’S *NIGHT* AND SUSAN
ABULHAWA’S *THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER***

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ABSTRACT

Reading propels a person to give testimony to a text’s memory imprints. Subsequently a reader has to respond, has to take sides. Thereby, inevitable decisions have to be taken to exhibit the substantiation of impersonal memory trauma creates. Trauma mutes the subject and destroys one’s identity. The paper focuses on the three aspects of a traumatic dehumanizing experience: Deprivation, Exploitation and Oppression as exhibited in the memoir of Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water*.

KEY WORDS: Trauma, Dehumanization, Deprivation, Exploitation, Oppression, Testimony

“In order to cope with a trauma, we symbolize” (Zizek, Slavoj. *On Belief*. London: Routledge, 2001).

Literature portrays life with all its nuances. As the world progresses in various fields, there seems to be a cut-throat competition between races, nations, religions, genders, castes, languages and classes. The world has witnessed many chaotic and disturbing situations like the Vietnam War, bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Holocaust etc. A writer is forced to express the massacres of the ostracised and the silenced of his community. While Holocaust haunts and fills every one with horror, the Israel-Palestinian conflict in the Middle-East has driven Palestinians as refugees filled with despair. Testimonial Literature communicates the experiences which are painful and thereby propels the readers to respond and to take sides. Trauma mutes the subject and destroys one’s identity. The paper focuses on the three aspects of a traumatic dehumanizing experience: Deprivation, Exploitation and oppression as exhibited in the memoir of Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. The haunting experiences get resonated in the narratives which are chronicled in the history of the world.

In both the literary works the characters are deprived of their freedom, exploited in innumerable incomprehensible ways in the ghettos created for them. The similarities found in the two literary works are: 1) Both works have boys as narrators: In *Night* Elie Wiesel sketches the happenings when he was a fifteen-year-old boy and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* by Susan Abulhawa is seen through the eyes of Khaled, the grandson of Nazmieh. 2) Journeys are undertaken. In *Night* the Jews were forced to move from Sighet to various concentration camps. In *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, Um Momdough’s Baraka family and the villagers were forced to relocate from Beit Daras to Gaza. 3) Refugee Crisis in various concentration camps and in

the Gaza Strip 4) Rationed Food was given 5) Presence of Multiple stories 6) Child Abuse disturbs the peace of the characters 7) Collective memory of suffering and trauma.

Derrida highlights that a work of criticism has the responsibility to address the, “impossibility and necessity” of bearing witness to the “unexperienced experience” (Derrida 47). Ulrich Baer deems as a reader’s position: “...to recognize another’s experience of trauma as irreducibly *other* and irreducible to generalizations” (11) every literary work, every *other*, bearing witness to the traumatic makes “...an uncompromising claim...to be read in its own terms. Yet at the same time...each...opens itself to iteration, understanding, and address” (11). Thereby literary rendering of trauma becomes “absolutely singular” (9). Trauma as Baer calls, “a twofold *structural* disjunction between an experience and its integration into narrative memory, understanding and communicability...All such experiences...[are] located somewhere outside memory yet within the psyche (10). The subject of trauma becomes immobile due to the haunting effects left by trauma. American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder* (1980) terms Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as painful which permeates in the conscious and sub-consciousness mind the past inflictions repeatedly. Caroline Garland defines Trauma: “as a kind of wound” (9). Cathy Caruth terms trauma: “as a wound inflicted on the mind” (3).

Elie Wiesel (September 30, 1928 – July 2, 2016) was a Romanian-born in a Jewish ghetto in Hungary, American writer, professor, political activist, Nobel laureate, and a Holocaust survivor. He was involved with Jewish and human rights causes and helped establish the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D. C. He was named as United Nations Messenger of Peace. He was a founding board member of the New York Human Rights Foundation. Elie Wiesel wrote fifty-seven works of which the Trilogy *Night* was published in 1958 in French, *Dawn* (1961) and *Day* (1962). These express the destructive shattering treatment of the characters. Elie Wiesel states the reason for penning the memoir in his Preface: Did I write it so as not to go mad or, on the contrary, to go mad in order to understand the nature of madness, the immense, terrifying madness that had erupted in history and in the conscience of mankind?

Was it to leave behind a legacy of words, of memories, to help prevent history from repeating itself?

Or was it simply to preserve a record of the ordeal I endured as an adolescent at an age when one’s knowledge of death and evil should be limited to what one discovers in literature? (vii). Elie Wiesel sketches about the physical darkness and the darkness of the soul. He reiterates that as the number of holocaust survivors are dwindling every day, it becomes a bounden duty to write about it so that history is not forgotten and that such a dehumanizing impact should not be levied on any human person or community.

I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer – or my life, period – would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing, his crimes to be erased from human memory...It is obvious that the war which Hitler and his accomplices waged was a war not only against Jewish men, women and children but also against Jewish religion, Jewish culture, Jewish tradition, therefore Jewish memory (viii).

Night by Elie Wiesel revolves around “Hunger – thirst – fear – transport – selection – fire – chimney” (ix). The agony, misery and the uncertainty faced by the Jewish people in their

journey in sealed cattle cars perplexed them whether, it was the last voyage toward an unknown terrain. In *If this is Man*, Primo Levi states: “So that as soon as the cold, which throughout the winter had seemed our only enemy, had ceased, we become aware of our hunger; and repeating the same error, we now say: ‘If not for the hunger!’” (82,83). He questions the silence of the world and assumes whether the cruel and ruthless inhumane treatment of Hitler and his men was supported by the world. Any traumatic experience of a group, clan, community permeates pain even on the person who wounds like Tasso’s hero Tancred on Clorinda in *Gerusalemme Liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered). In her essay “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History,” Cathy Caruth agrees with Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* which observes that: “[...] history like trauma, is never simply one’s own [...] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s ‘traumas’”(24).

The need for the testimony arises as Elie Wiesel foregrounds that: “He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time” (xiv, xv). He recalls the terror in the eyes of the passengers of the cattle cars: “A wretched stench floated in the air... In front of us, those flames. In the air, the smell of burning flesh. It must have been around midnight. We had arrived in Birkenau” (28). He attempts to paint pictures of anguish in the minds of the readers: “Not far from us, flames, huge flames, were rising from a ditch. Something was being burned there. A truck drew close and unloaded its hold: small children. Babies! Yes, I did see this, with my own eyes...Children thrown into the flames” (32). Elie Wiesel communicates that he bears witness to such horrendous acts unleashed on innocent children. Elie Wiesel’s divulging the details goes with Richardson’s observation: “...if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people...or if we wish to use our privilege and skills to empower the people we study, then we need to foreground, not suppress the narrative within the human sciences” (Richardson 65).

The Jews in the Concentration Camps were tortured as they were given rationed food and had to work for long hours. They were repeatedly threatened by the SS men that “You are in Auschwitz. And Auschwitz is not a convalescent home. It is a concentration camp. Here you must work. If you don’t, you will go straight to the chimney. To the crematorium. Work or crematorium. The choice is yours” (Wiesel 39). It was written, “*Arbeit Macht Frei*. Work makes you free, Auschwitz” (40). The intimidation was clearly writ on the wall and that the Jews did not have any other option other than adhering to it as people of the world have become spectators. Amidst all the meaninglessness of the human existence: “The word chimney here was not an abstraction; it floated in the air, mingled with the smoke. It was perhaps, the only word that had a real meaning in this place” (39). The dehumanizing experiences, though unbelievable, the “smoke” conveyed the reality (39).

When Elie Wiesel’s father asked the *kapos* that he needed to relieve himself, he was slapped. “My father had just been struck in front of me, and I had not even blinked. I had watched and kept silent” (39). The physical abuses inflicted on the dear and near ones: “the helplessness induced by victimization” and the inability to stop such atrocities pricked their subterranean emotions (Koss 1338). Cathy Caruth says, “Different texts explore and speak about and through the profound story of a traumatic experience. The texts engage with a central problem which emerges from the actual experience of a specific crisis...repetitive flashbacks that literally re-enact the event because the mind cannot represent it otherwise” (6-8).

There are multiple stories in Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. 1) A young boy, a pipel who is thirteen years of age and his father Oberkapo were found with a significant quantity of weapons. 2) Elie Wiesel’s father’s yearning that his son remained with him in his last moments: “His voice had reached me from so far away, from so close. But I had not moved. I shall never forgive myself” (Wiesel xii). 3) An old man from Block 37 crawled and went near the cauldron and got up to taste the soup but was shot dead. 4) A young boy from Warshaw was hanged to death for stealing two bowls of soup. He denied being blindfolded and he shouted “Long live liberty! 5) A young boy from Poland was marching beside Elie Wisel. “His name was Zalman...I can’t go on. My stomach is bursting...He lowered his pants and fell to the ground...He must have died, trampled under the feet of the thousands of men who followed us” (86). 6) An old man had a piece of bread under his shirt and though he was telling that he had another piece for his son, his son killed his father and took the piece. After seeing this, two fellows joined together and took the bread from the son. “When they withdrew there were two dead bodies next to me, the father and the son. I was sixteen” (101, 102). 7) Juliek, the boy from Warsaw who played the violin in the Buna orchestra was found dead with his violin in a heap of dead bodies. The multiple stories signify that the painful experiences are not singular but that of many, hence polyphonous.

Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian American writer and human rights activist. She is the author of the novel *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and founder of a non-governmental organization, *Playground for Palestine*. Her second novel was *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and her third novel was *Against the Loveless World* (2020). *Mornings in Jenin* was initially published in 2006 as *The Son of David* which was her debut novel. She is courageously involved in the global campaign movement for *Boycott Divestment and Sanctions* which promotes various forms of boycott against Israel. She also serves as a speaker for *Al Awda*, the Right to Return to Coalition.

The themes of the novel include: Sufferings of the Refugees, Rape, Child Abuse, Unemployment, Widowhood, Single Motherhood and War in 1948, 1967, 2008 between Israel and Palestine. Palestinians are made to endure political, sociological, physical, financial and psychological challenges. The narration is seen through the eyes of Khaled, who is supposed to be the son of Alwan, daughter of Nazmiyeh.

The conflict between Israel and Palestine becomes the setting of the novel especially in the years 1948, 1967 and 2008. The novel traces the life of the Palestinian refugees who were forced to move from Beit Daras to Gaza. The Baraka family also moves out of their ancestral place, Beit Daras. The novel portrays the story of four generations of women of the Baraka family belonging to Beit Daras. They suffer due to the conflict between Israel and Palestine: the great-grandmother Um Mamdough, the grandmother Nazmiyeh, mother Alwan, the granddaughter Nur and also the plight of the great-granddaughter, Rhet Shel. The great grandmother, Um Mamdough is portrayed as being possessed by a spirit (djinni) named Sulayman, is shot dead by the Zionist soldiers. Nazmiyeh is raped on her way to Gaza by Israeli soldiers. Mariam is killed by the Israeli soldiers. Alwan is widowed, diseased and is unable to get proper medical care. Nur undergoes sexual abuse as a child and later is betrayed by a married doctor, Dr. Jamal Musmar. Rhet Shel has a disturbing childhood due to the threatening situations of Gaza.

Mariam, the sister of Nazmiyeh has one brown eye and another green eye. She also has the quality to see the colours of the people and hence know their intentions. She goes near the river of Beit Daras and then conveys that Khaled teaches her to read and write and shows what he had taught her. Upon questioning, Mariam says that Khaled is not a djinni or a spirit but Nazmiyeh's grandson. This adds to the surreal situation of the novel.

When the sisters move out of Beit Daras, Mariam is killed and Nazmiyeh is raped by the Israeli soldiers:

The sisters locked their eyes for an interminable instant, though not long enough to fit a word before the bullet to Mariam's head rang out through eternity...a wild howl bellowed from the depths of Nazmiyeh...Two more soldiers arrived, aroused by the vulgarity, and yanked her by the hair...More soldiers moved in and out of her body, scraping away her life until they had had enough. She lay there, a hollow carved-out thing streaked in spent tears, crusted blood, and dried fear. She listened to the hiss of her breath and surrendered to the silence of wanting to die, waiting for them to kill her, too (Abulhawa 38,39).

The rape victims already undergo physical and psychological stress due to the "disempowering experience" while the second rape which is social victimization maims them (Guerette and Caron 47).

Susan Abulhawa understands the revelatory truths and depicts the predicament of the Palestinians as refugees in the Gaza Strip:

The refugees moved about, beset by confusion for days. Sufficient tents were not distributed for weeks and people slept on the earth, with stones and insects and animals...They lined up twice a day for bread and soup. They lined up for communal toilets...And when the United Nations officials arrived, the refugees lined up to put their names in a registry, handwritten entries in thick notebooks. In return, they received small booklets to be stamped once for every ration received (Abulhawa 43).

The mundane experience of the refugees stuck in the present highlights that: "The future brings anxiety because you don't belong and can't move forward. The past brings depression, because you can't go home, your memories fade and everything you know is gone" (Nayeri 207-208). Similar situation is Salma's predicament in Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses* "She [Salma] had lived in Kuwait, but no, she wasn't Kuwaiti, and no, she had never been to Palestine, but yes, she was Palestinian" (210).

The refugee crises worsened as is seen through Khaled's narration due to dislocation and displacement, "rather than returning and regrouping, family were leaving and dispersing. She thought Palestine was scattering farther away at the same time that Israel was moving closer. They confiscated the hills and assembled Jewish only settler colonies on the most fertile soil. They uprooted indigenous songs and planted lies in the ground to grow a new story" (59). As Arthur Marwick states: "As memory is to the individual, so history is to the community or society...It's only through a sense of history that communities establish their identity, orientate themselves, understand their relationship to the past and to other communities and societies" (14). When history is distorted, W.H. Auden's "Refugee Blues," conveying the plight of the Jews under Nazis is apt even for the predicament of the Palestinians: "Once we had a country and we thought it fair, / Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:/We cannot go there now, my dear, we /cannot go there now" (169). Due to this many young men joined PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) to fight against the Israelites.

Abdul Qader, who used to go for fishing for livelihood stopped it as he was tortured and teased by Israeli soldiers in the sea, though they were in their boundary. Soldiers laughed and shot a hole in the boat. The fishermen scrambled to plug it.

‘You say you want freedom, but you are oppressing the fish,’ one of the soldiers said laughing. ‘Maybe we should tangle you in a net to show you how the fish feel.’ They ordered the fishermen to throw their catch back into the sea and they all watched those sea creatures swim away. Then the soldiers ordered the men to strip and get out of the boat, making them count to a hundred while treading water. When they finished the soldiers ordered them to start counting all over. The minutiae of cruelty alleviated the languor of patrolling the sea; so the soldiers were amused, but then they grew bored, though they waited and took bets as the fishermen counted in the water (Abulhawa 132).

Lindner’s definition of humiliation sketches the situation of Abdul Qader: “the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away pride, honour, and dignity. To be humiliated is to be placed against your will...in a deeply hurting way, in a situation that is dramatically inferior to what you feel you should expect...One of the defining characteristics of humiliation as a process is that the victim is forced into passivity, acted upon, made helpless” (29).

Khaled was about to celebrate his tenth birthday on 27th December 2008 when Israel attacked the Palestinians.

Blood poured and dust rose. Smoke painted lungs and hearts raced. The remaining flour mill, the last source of bread, was bombed. Schools, homes, mosques and universities too. Then Israel sprayed with white phosphorous...They brought helicopters that sent out enormous streams of white confetti that streaked the sky like a spiderweb. And the confetti landed like a million candles with a million flames. Some people caught the confetti flames and ran around with them on their bodies, yelling. What an invention! Everyone knows that the Jews are the smartest people in the world (Abulhawa 150,151).

The despair and the hopelessness in fighting and resisting against a sophisticated Israel is evident in the words of the narrator. Jean Amery’s remarks about torture in the concentration camps fits for the condition of the Palestinians under the clutches of Israel:

Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. Torture is ineradicably burned into him [...] It was over for a while. It still is not over. Twenty-two years later I am still dangling over the ground by dislocated arms, panting...Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under the torture, fully, will not be regained (34, 36, 40)

There are multiple stories in Susan Abulhawa’s *The Blue Between Sky and Water*: UmMomdouh, the matriarch, Momdouh, the son, Nazmiyeh, the sister, Mariam, younger sister, Atiyeh, the husband of Nazimiyeh, Alwan, daughter of Nazmiyeh, Yasmine, the daughter of the bee keeper who was married by Momdouh, Mazen, eldest son of Nazmiyeh, Abdul Qader, husband of Alwan, Nzinga, Nur, Rhet Shel, Dr.Jamal Musmar, a Palestinian Psychologist.

Susan Abulhawa has ended the novel with an epilogue stating about Israel’s attack on Gaza in 2014 when she has just finished her novel. When many Palestinians were killed, injured, and homeless before a well-equipped Israel, Hamas continued to fight with minimal food supplies. In Yael Daniel’s *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, several critics have termed Historical trauma as: “collective, historical and cumulative psychic

wounding of a nation or tribe over a period of time” (342). Thereby it permeates in the mind and haunts the subsequent generations. The Noble Peace Prize Acceptance Speech in Oslo on 10th December 1986, Elie Wiesel says that: “We must take sides, Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victims. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere...Both the Jewish people and the Palestinian people have lost too many sons and daughters and have shed too much blood. This must stop, and all attempts to stop it, must be encouraged” (118-119). While Elias Khoury in *Gate of the Sun* remarks: “You and I and every human being on the face of the planet should have known and not stood by in silence, should have prevented that beast from destroying its victims in that barbaric, unprecedented manner...because their death meant the death of humanity within us” (295-296) and in *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf declares her anti-war stand while analysing the Spanish War “War is an abomination: a barbarity; war must be stopped (21), the clarion call to end the atrocities echoes from various quarters.

The destructive traumatic experiences make the oppressed impose it on others as well. Freud’s analysis in “Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego”, exhibits the traits, the thought processes and the reaction of the oppressed: “The dread exhibited by these poor wretches corresponds to their violent struggles against the unconscious wish to spread their infection onto other people; for why should they alone be infected and cut off from so much? Why not other people as well? And the same anecdote is to be found in the pretty anecdote of the judgment of Solomon, if one woman’s child is dead, the other shall not have a live one either” (686). Thereby one is shocked to witness that the victim of yesteryears becomes the oppressor in the contemporary political scenario. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapter I, Paula Friere observes:

This [The struggle for humanization] is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed.

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both (44).

As explained in Plato’s *Republic* while *Kyklos*, (Cycles) in ancient Greek proposes of a cycle of Governments from democracy, aristocracy and monarchy due to ochlocracy, oligarchy and tyranny, the oppressed becoming an oppressor is not a solution to any crisis. The traumatic experiences of the innocent people and the conflict between the descendants of the sons of Abraham are disturbing. On 16th September 2020, the then Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Speech at the White House Signing Ceremony for the Historic Peace Agreements, the “Abraham Accords” with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain that: “...Bringing hope to all the children of Abraham” (3.57-4.00 Minutes) has to become a reality. With arguments and counter arguments, peace cannot reign over the world. The unforgiving attitude leads only to disastrous consequences. The binarism of oppressor-oppressed cannot be linear and the leaders have to understand that it is a cyclical process. In view of such a grave mire, the leaders have to find solutions through bi-lateral relations and dialogue. Thereby, the leaders have to ensure

fellowship and reconciliation which would bring peace in the world especially in the life of a common man.

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