



Intergenerational Trauma in Palestinian Fiction: Theoretical Approaches and Literary Landscapes

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Abstract

This article examines the representation and transmission of intergenerational trauma in Palestinian fiction through the lenses of trauma theory and postcolonial literary criticism. Drawing upon foundational concepts such as postmemory (Hirsch), belated witnessing (Caruth), and exilic identity (Said), the study investigates how contemporary Palestinian narratives channel the psychic legacies of the Nakba (1948) and decades of displacement. Through close readings of works by Ghassan Kanafani, Susan Abulhawa, Raja Shehadeh, and Sahar Khalifeh, this article illustrates how trauma is not only inscribed in personal memory but also transmitted culturally and literarily across generations. The interweaving of narrative fragmentation, spectral presences, and landscape metaphors underscores a distinct literary mode that encapsulates trauma's persistent return in Palestinian collective consciousness. Ultimately, this article argues that Palestinian fiction functions both as a repository and a reclamation—a space where silence, loss, and dispossession are transformed into aesthetic and political resistance.

I. Introduction

The legacy of the Nakba—al-nakbah, the catastrophe of 1948—continues to shape the identity and literary production of Palestinians across generations. While the initial trauma of mass displacement and dispossession was experienced by those who lived through it, its reverberations persist in the works of their descendants. This phenomenon of inherited trauma, or intergenerational trauma, offers a compelling site of literary exploration in contemporary Palestinian fiction.

As Cathy Caruth notes, trauma is not simply an event but an experience that is “not fully owned at the time of its occurrence” and instead returns belatedly through repetition and narrative (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). For Palestinians, the rupture of 1948 and its ongoing repercussions—occupation, exile, statelessness—constitute not only political realities but narrative frameworks. These are encoded in fiction through fragmented timelines, absent bodies, and haunted spaces.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory is particularly salient here: “the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 106). In Palestinian fiction, this postmemorial dynamic surfaces in characters who carry the burdens of past losses they did not witness but which define their subjectivity.

Take for instance Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), where the protagonist Amal writes:

“Our history is a curse I carry in my blood... stories my father never told but I somehow always knew.” (P.166)

This quote encapsulates the paradox of inherited memory—unknown yet intimately known, silent yet screaming within.

Likewise, Ghassan Kanafani, often hailed as the literary father of resistance, employs allegory to depict dislocation and generational rupture. In *Returning to Haifa* (1969), the protagonist says:

“Everything was gone. Even the memory of what had been, even the longing. Only the loss remained.” (P.45-46)



Kanafani's narrative interrogates not only physical return but the impossibility of reclaiming a coherent past.

Raja Shehadeh's autobiographical fiction—particularly *Palestinian Walks* (2007)—presents the landscape as a palimpsest of trauma. He writes:

“The hills remember for us what we choose to forget. Their silence speaks louder than our words.” (P. 106)

Here, the land itself becomes a witness, bearing the scars of war and occupation across generations.

The theoretical approaches guiding this analysis include trauma theory, postcolonial theory, and memory studies. Scholars such as Edward Said, who argued for the “contrapuntal reading” of exile literature, and Dominick LaCapra, who distinguishes between “acting out” and “working through” trauma, offer tools for understanding how Palestinian fiction negotiates collective pain and political defiance.

This article proposes that Palestinian fiction functions both as a cultural archive and as narrative therapy, resisting erasure through the articulation of generational suffering. By mapping trauma across time, these narratives construct a literary landscape where memory, mourning, and identity intersect—a space where fiction serves both as witness and resistance.

II. Literary Landscapes of Intergenerational Trauma

Palestinian fiction has long functioned as both archive and counter-narrative—a vehicle for preserving memory and resisting historical erasure. Intergenerational trauma, as reflected across Palestinian literary landscapes, emerges through narrative fragmentation, symbolic landscapes, and displaced identities. Authors like Ghassan Kanafani, Susan Abulhawa, Raja Shehadeh, and Sahar Khalifeh navigate this psychic inheritance through stylistic rupture and emotional excavation.

Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* offers a foundational literary treatment of post-Nakba trauma. The story's central motif—a Palestinian couple returning to their former home, now occupied by a Jewish family—reveals the layered grief of both personal and national loss. Kanafani explores generational rupture through the abandoned son, Dov, now raised as an Israeli:

“We should have fought to the last bullet... even if we had died. We left him behind.” (P.38)

This haunting line signals the guilt of a generation who, forced into flight, passed unresolved trauma onto their descendants.

Kanafani's work, as Edward Said suggested, “compresses the personal and the collective into a single narrative wound” (Said, 2000).

Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* carries this wound forward. Through Amal's journey, the novel captures how trauma is not only inherited but inscribed onto the body and psyche of subsequent generations. Amal reflects:

“I inherited a suffering I could not name, as if grief were passed through blood.” (P.166)

Abulhawa's narrative aligns closely with Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory—memories transmitted so deeply that they shape identity, even when unexperienced directly. Amal's fractured narrative, peppered with silences and temporal dislocations, embodies what Cathy Caruth describes as “a history that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (Caruth, 1996).

Similarly, Raja Shehadeh's *Palestinian Walks* employs landscape as a metaphor for memory and trauma. The hills, valleys, and ancient terraces become topographies of dispossession:

“Each time I return, a part of the path has disappeared, swallowed by settlement or asphalt.” (P.28)

Here, the terrain itself reflects the gradual erasure of Palestinian history, acting as both witness and casualty. Trauma, for Shehadeh, is spatial as much as temporal.

Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* offers a striking examination of generational divide within resistance. Usama, a returning fedayeen, confronts his cousin Adil, who seeks survival within the system. Their conflict reflects not only political divergence but inherited psychological burdens:

“You carry your dead in your eyes, Usama. But here we live with ours. We bury them again every day.” (P.86)

This juxtaposition captures the coexistence of memory and normalization—how trauma morphs in occupied daily life. In *The End of Spring*, Khalifeh continues this thread through Basil, a young journalist haunted by the Second Intifada:

“The story I wanted to write kept dissolving into silence. Too much had no words.” (P.174)

Basil's muteness is emblematic of what LaCapra (2001) terms acting out—a compulsive reliving that impedes healing. For Khalifeh, the inability to narrate is itself a symptom of trauma's persistence.

Across these texts, intergenerational trauma manifests not only in what is told, but how. Fragmented plots, absent narrators, and landscapes



laden with memory function as literary strategies to mirror psychological rupture. Palestinian fiction thus serves as both a medium of remembrance and a site of resistance—resisting amnesia, resisting erasure.

As Said (2000) wrote:

“Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience... its essential sadness can never be surmounted.”

This sadness pervades the generational psyche of Palestinian narratives, echoing across decades as both burden and literary imperative.

III. Conclusion: Inheriting Silence, Rewriting Loss

Palestinian fiction, shaped by the generational aftershocks of the Nakba and continuous displacement, forms a vital literary cartography of trauma and resistance. Across diverse temporal and geographical settings, the voices of Ghassan Kanafani, Susan Abulhawa, Raja Shehadeh, and Sahar Khalifeh converge on one unyielding truth: trauma is not a singular event, but a recurring inheritance, passed down through silence, storytelling, and the very act of survival.

This literature powerfully enacts what Cathy Caruth termed trauma’s “insistent return”—its inability to remain in the past. Kanafani’s returning to Haifa ends not with closure, but with confrontation, as the father states:

“We gave up something we didn’t even know we possessed.” (P.49)

This moment speaks to the unconscious surrender of both place and narrative, where trauma is retroactively understood, yet never fully resolved.

In *Mornings in Jenin*, Susan Abulhawa’s protagonist Amal similarly recognizes that inherited pain resists assimilation:

“Some things, once broken, cannot be mended... they simply stay with you, becoming part of your shadow.” (P.245)

Here, trauma becomes a spectral presence—unseen yet always attached. Such metaphors underscore the inescapability of memory for second and third-generation Palestinians, aligning with Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory.

Sahar Khalifeh’s *The End of Spring* provides a younger generational lens, one consumed not by direct exile but by its consequences. Basil’s disillusionment encapsulates the paradox of growing up amid unresolved trauma:

“I was born into defeat... I only ever knew how to write elegies.” (Pg.102)

Khalifeh’s portrayal reveals how literature itself becomes the repository of inherited sorrow.

Meanwhile, Raja Shehadeh’s *Palestinian Walks* offers a quiet yet poignant reflection:

“The land remembers even when the people are made to forget.” (P. 106)

This evokes the landscape as a palimpsest of memory—nature as both witness and victim of political and psychological occupation.

Collectively, these texts illustrate that intergenerational trauma in Palestinian fiction is not merely thematic; it is formative, shaping character, structure, and voice. Fragmented chronologies, silenced narrators, and recurring motifs of return, absence, and mourning all function as narrative responses to historical rupture.

Ultimately, Palestinian fiction refuses to allow the past to settle. It reclaims history not only through resistance but through inscription—transforming inherited trauma into a space of agency, articulation, and cultural continuity. As Edward Said wrote, “Exile is a jealous state; it demands memory and never allows one to forget.” (P. 174)

Palestinian writers have taken up that demand—not to dwell in loss, but to give it form, voice, and resistance across generations.

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