Cultural Trauma In The Blue Between Sky And Water

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to examine the impact of cultural trauma on the Palestinians following Israel-Palestine's war depicted in Susan Abulhawa's novel The Blue Between Sky And Water. War traumatizes human psyche, creates anxiety, dread, restlessness, and depression. Jeffery Alexander (2004) propagates that communities go through trauma when subjected to extreme scrutiny or radical views being thrusted upon them. This results into trauma transmitted from psyche of an individual to the whole culture. The impact of Israeli-Palestinian war on the psyche of Palestinians is discussed in Susan Abulhawa's novel, The Blue between Sky and Water. The protracted war of Israel-Palestine affects the Palestinians to such an extent that they get cultural trauma. The people of Beit Daras, a small village in Palestine, is traumatized to their core. The trauma felt is not only cultural or individual but intergenerational too. Nazmiyeh bears the trauma of her rape and Mariam's death. She flashbacks always before their eyes. Mazen begins a resistance against Jews on what happened to his mother. Even though, Mamdouh has left for the US to gain financial stability feeling a loss of his roots. The author presents before us four generations of a family who become the target of homelessness and identity crisis due to war.

KEY TERMS: Cultural Trauma, Culture Shock, Palestine- Israel War, Nur.

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CULTURAL TRAUMA IN THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER

War inflicts traumatic experiences on the affectees of the war. It traumatizes human psyche, producing anxiety, dread, restlessness, and insomnia in people impacted by war. The inflictions of war and their subsequent recollections exert a great deal of stress on human mind. The research attempts to shed light on cultural trauma in post-war Palestinian society. The impact of Israeli-Palestinian war on the psyche of Palestinian people are discussed in Susan Abulhawa's novel, The Blue between Sky and Water. He presents before us four generations of a family who became a target of homelessness and identity crisis due to war.
This research employs Jeffery C. Alexander's concept of 'Theory of Cultural Trauma'.

Jeffery Charles Alexander is a sociologist and one of the major social thinkers in the United States. Alexander is a sociology professor at Yale University. He co-directs the Center for Cultural Sociology with Philip Smith (CCS). He began his career as a Marxist sociologist and collaborated with Fred Block, but eventually became a democratic socialist. His primary areas of study include theory, culture, and politics. He has examined many cultural codes and narratives that provide information about various aspects of social life in various civilizations.

Cultural Trauma is a phrase coined from two terms: culture, which refers to the beliefs, practices, and social behavior of specific people or civilization, and trauma, which refers to a profoundly unpleasant or unsettling event. Trauma can be caused by some triggering events such as natural disasters (tsunami, earthquakes, floods), or manmade (wars, colonization, slavery, violence) or medical concerns. Any event that violates familiar ideas and expectations (for example access to known ways of being or living, access to residence/territory, traditions etc.) held individually and collectively about the world. Sometimes deliberately and systematically a group's collective identity is destroyed based on their cultural identity, religion, race or ethnicity that the perpetrator deems unacceptable.

Jeffery Alexander (2004) propagates that communities go through trauma when subjected to extreme scrutiny or radical views being thrusted upon them. Such incidents and attitudes leave permanent marks on the psyche of the people and together they feel the heat of world polarized and being pushed to periphery. This results into trauma transmitted from psyche of an individual to the whole culture. They feel the loss of support and connection on a larger scale with the community and they feel skeptical about the social fabric that was their support system. Cultural trauma relates to the personal but it also focuses on the community level that shapes identity of individuals and communities.

> "Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who

they are, where they came from, and where they
want to go" (Alexander 10).

Jefferson (2004) has mentioned different carrier groups that are instrumental in spreading cultural trauma. Institutions, science, legal groups and mass media are the pivotal elements in shaping the newly emerging identities and political discourses. The Blue Between Sky and Water has been read against the theoretical framework of Jeffery Alexander's. Different instances from the novel have been taken to support the argument of the study. Quotes from the novel have been used and paraphrased to prove the validity of the argument that this study makes.

Countries like Palestine which have been in siege for decades, literature, novels, and stories pave the way to share their part of the story with the world. Writing as a tool of resistance makes them heard and identified. The horrific conflict between Israelis and Palestinians made them suffer a lot during and after the war. War kills brutally, and injures most of the people physically as well as psychologically. Susan Abulhawa gives an insight into the lives of Palestinian Muslims undergoing the cultural trauma due to the incidents happening to them in their personal lives and all these incidents of individuals when string together form a general atmosphere of trauma that the whole culture shares with them.

R. Srinivasa Murthy and Rashmi Lakshminarayana (2006) write in their journal that war-related deaths are only the 'tip of the iceberg.' Additional than death, few other outcomes are listed. They include endemic poverty, deteriorating health, disability, economic/social decline, and psychological disorders. War affects the day to day routine life and rituals of the people and same what happened with Nazmiyeh and Atiyeh's wedding. Both the families wanted to celebrate and enjoy a big wedding but due to the anxious situations they were married very simply. Their wedding is described as:
"'For now, they brought a ma'zoon to officiate the marriage of Atiyeh and Nazmiyeh so their union was halal in the eyes of Allah. Such a hasty marriage with a deferred wedding was unusual, but these were unusual times" (Abulhawa 30).

War compels people to lose their home, identity, loved ones, wealth and everything that they don't want to lose. When Israel attacks Palestine, hundreds of people migrate to move for safety. Beit Daras when attacked by Jews the villagers started to flee to neighboring villages to save their lives. They sent the females for safety and the men stayed behind to fight the Zionist soldiers till their last breath. Nazmiyeh had to go with the rest of her in-law family women and she planned to take Marium with herself. When she went to fetch Marium she found her by the river talking to herself.

Leila Baradaran Jamili and Ziba Roshanzamir (2017) explain in their study article that cultural trauma is a subset of trauma that is associated with collective memory identification and the detrimental effects that may be left on the society's cultural gatherings. Individuals are looking for security, order, association, conviction, which means, identity, and love. On the off chance if something suddenly happens that seriously subverts those necessities, shockingly, those individuals are being traumatized as a consequence of a

horrible event. Thus, trauma distorts the traumatised individual's strength, mental presence, and knowledge. When an event traumatises not only one individual, but also all members of a collectivity or gathering, the trauma is referred to as cultural trauma or collective trauma. Marium insisted and persuaded her sister that she will come tomorrow with the neighbors because she wanted to spend more time with her mom and brother. Unsure and confused as everyone was due to the war, Nazmiyeh reluctantly accepted. The terror of war had clouded her thinking ability.

"Cultural trauma suggests new meaningful and casual relationship between previously unrelated events" (Alexander 1). If an event traumatises not just one individual, but also the whole collectivity or group, the trauma is referred to as cultural trauma or collective trauma. Cultural trauma is any type of trauma that has an effect on culture, that is, cultural trauma in the form of a wound to cultural tissue that is culturally interpreted (Sztompka 458). Cultural trauma, in this perspective, begins with heinous errors that point to the society's cultural foundations. It is far from a primary issue in generating, much less generating, and the communal sense of being disturbed.

Cultural trauma, according to psychologists, is a psychiatric condition in which the patient suffers as a result of a trauma or shock experienced in a past life. The same happens to Nazmiyeh no doubt that among the characters, we see the most suffering character is surely her. She decided to go back to Beit Daras to get her sister. Upon reaching her home, she is gang raped by Isralei soldiers for being a Palestinian Muslim. She is forced to scream for one of the soldiers but as she didn't understand his language she was beaten harshly by him. She silently endures all that so that her sister does not get scared. The vulgarity of the Zionist soldiers can be seen in the following lines:

> "As the soldiers handled her, ripping her clothes, forcing her onto
> her back, baring her flesh, Nazmiyeh ordered Mariam to turn
> away and close her eyes and ears as tightly as she could. She said
> it would all be over soon and they would go on their way. She
> could endure this, she thought" (Abulhawa 39).

She had expected the ill treatment, but not the killing of her sister. To make her scream one of the soldiers went and dragged Mariam by her hair like a doll that cannot move on her own. Her wooden box, which she loved the most and was her only dream, clutched to her chest. This incident haunts Nazmiyeh throughout her life and later on she talks to walls and many other things claiming that Marium can see her and talk to her because she loves her sister a lot. Watching the killing of someone you love the most can be the worst traumatic event.

> "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, her wooden box of dreams falling open,
> its contents spilled. From the terrible knowing that the sun would
> never fully rise again in her life, a wild howl bellowed from the
> depths of Nazmiyeh" (Abulhawa 40).

Jeffery Alexander in his book (2004) shares Lay theory that states; traumas are normally happening occasions that breaks an individual or collective entertainer's feeling of prosperity. At the end of the day, the ability to break the "trauma" is thought to rise up out of occasions themselves. The response to such traumatic events, referred to as "traumatization," is perceived and assumed to be a rapid and unreflexive one. According to the layman's perspective, trauma occurs when a traumatic event connects with human instinct. Individuals require safety, order, love, and association. In the event that something happens that pointedly sabotages these necessities, it barely appears to be astounding, as per the lay hypothesis, those individuals will be traumatized subsequently (Alexander 2-3).

The Six Day War that happened in 1967, Israel attacked Egypt bringing more Zionist soldiers to the region. Nazmiyeh's husband and older sons were captured with many other Palestinian innocent men. Nazmiyeh along with her younger children, who clung to her kaftan terrified, were observing all this. She tried to stop them but her legs froze and she was unable to move an inch. Being an outsider we can't feel what the oppressed ones are going through. Their skins were stained with the humiliation of that conflict. Everybody pushed forward, bathed in new tragedy, new wrath, and resurrected fear. Individuals sat in front of their televisions and watched as this Jewish army of Poles, Austrians, Germans, French, British, Italians, Russians, Ukrainians, and Iranians marched into Jerusalem, obliterating non-Jewish areas. As she does in the novel, Susan Abulhawa attempts to tell the events of the Six Day War as

> "It was a shocking moment that split the world in two: those cheering and those crying. Palestinians cried, but tears always dry up or turn into something else. Eventually, the abnormal was normalized, and the constant brutality of Israeli soldiers became the cost of living" (Abulhawa 55).

Cultural shock is a phenomenon in which an expatriate reacts differently to a new culture. Culture shock, in accordance with the definition of Oxford online dictionary is ―the sense of confusion experienced by someone when he/she is abruptly introduced to a foreign culture, way of life, or set of attitudes.

The tale of Nur's life in the novel The Blue Between Sky and Water is a collision of two worlds, two distinct nations, even two distinct looks and customs. The novel's protagonist, Nur, represents all Palestinians worldwide and the impact of a particular occurrence.The writer describes various stages of Nur's life. She is an American, is financially stable, but getting adjusted to that particular environment is challenging. She goes through some cultural problems in most of the times she can manage with it, but in many places she becomes unable to avoid the reality of the foreign culture. In the novel, the central character Nur, faces many issues and challenges. Some of these are external and some are internal. In these problems, one countable problem is that of culture shock. When Nur for the very first time comes to Palastine, she becomes the victim of cultural shock.

Stress that accompanies the process of cross-cultural adaptation is termed as cultural shock. In contemporary works (Dongfeng 70-74). Once she has been transferred to a

Christian foster home where she has been the only Muslim, she felt unnecessary scrutiny that has been directed towards her. Once she was caught with other students for smoking, she was punished and scolded for her religious beliefs. To get out of this unaccommodating situation, she went to the church's father the next day and accepted their religion. Khaled narrates the story of that day as;

> " So, one Wednesday at Chapel Service, she walked down the aisle to accept Jesus. She was baptized that Sunday and they all rejoiced. ―You're saved now,‖ they said. She was forgiven and her punishment was lifted, but in private, Nur worried for her soul and prayed to Allah" (Abulhawa 200).

Nur decides to come to the place of her grandfather but there too she finds it difficult to adjust as she has been raised in a different way. She has been different from them, if not in the looks but in the grooming she received during her life. She does not feel at home, even at her Tete Nazmiyeh's place, because things are dealt with in a different way there. Her courtship with Jamal has been looked down upon as things are not approached this way in Palestine. She has been used to American culture, so dealing with Jamal in an Islamic country has been challenging.

A man or woman who moves to a new location will undoubtedly experience some form of surprise or culture shock as a result of the shift in both the thin and thick layers of culture. At the thin level, changes in cuisine, clothes, art, music, and architecture are considered, while at the thick level, changes in attitudes, thinking, perceptions, and conduct are considered. As a newcomer to Palestine, she was taken aback by the cultural shifts, which are very typical among all immigrants. Culture shock is the initial stage in an immigrant's life regardless of their purpose for immigration after they arrive in a foreign country. The duration of culture shock varies according to the degree of contrast between their own and the new cultures. Nur experienced culture shock for several days, as the environment in Palestine was diametrically opposed to that in America. She was incapable of tolerating or comprehending the things she had believed in the beginning. Even Nazmiyeh recognised Nur's distinction from them and lack of familiarity with their culture and values. It can be expressed as follows:

> "Hajje Nazmiyeh ignored her daughter, ―Nur, I can't hold your American ways against you because I should have tried harder to bring you back. But you are here now and you mustn't take this sinful path. That man better not come to our home unless it's with honor to ask for your hand. Am I making myself clear?" (Abulhawa 189).

Nur also observed that being a Palestinian woman, meant to be meek, submissive and mostly dependent on the male characters of the family and she internalized these ideas. She understood that in America the theory was quite different, Americans treat all humans equally and American girls are independent, active, unafraid, and direct. As a

Palestinian, Nazmiyeh could not accept such approaches and she could not see Nur being too much American. Nazmiyeh and other women in Gaza firmly believed some special codes for women to follow. They do not consider men and women equal. Therefore Nazmiyeh grooms Nur in such words:

> "This is one thing I will teach you. The other thing is that here,
> in your birthright land, culture, and heritage, what you do
> affects your entire family. And protecting the family must come
> before your individual fancy" (Abulhawa 201).

CONCLUSION

The Palestinian-Arabs of the story are trapped in these cultural traumas for generations and appear to be traumatized. The study says that war traumatizes people, their sense of belonging and culture. The people of Beit Daras, a small village in Palestine, was traumatized and shaken to their core by the trauma due to Israel-Palestine conflict. The trauma experienced was not only cultural or individual but intergenerational. Nazmiyeh bears the trauma of her rape and Mariam's death, and she always thinks that Mariam is there watching them all. Mazen begins a resistance against Jews, based on what happened to his mother. Even though, Mamdouh has left for the US to gain financial stability, he felt the loss of his roots. The Palestinians have to get adjusted to the new place for their survival. Silence is the only solution that they find for all the miseries. People belonging to more than one culture are at the rift. This tussle adds more to the psychological and emotional dissatisfaction of a person who longs for some fixity in life that he is unable to achieve. Nur and Mamdouh struggle for identity crisis in American culture. Mamdouh feels the loss of culture, history, and traditions that are identity markers of their native Palestinian culture. Similarly, Nur, born and brought up in America, still finds herself an outcast due to her religious beliefs and other modes of living. The whole Palestinian community feels the loss of identity and ownership following Israeli bombardment and displacement. They are stripped from lands and nationality and forced to live the lives of an exile. The trauma of being killed purely on the basis of ethnicity is immense. The genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians is continued. Thus, the issues of cultural trauma, identity crisis, statelessness have engulfed the people of Palestine.

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