

Challenging Trauma's Invisibility: Constructing Voice in AlAmmar's *Silence is a Sense*

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Abstract—Traumatic experiences often leave one suppressed and spiritually weak due to marginalization and voicelessness. This article aims to show how the protagonist in *Silence is a Sense* manipulates the disadvantages following and associated with trauma to create her own voice. Layla AlAmmar employs the theme of trauma to elaborate on refugees' need to concede their own power of speech, acknowledging their past, present and future existence. Through textual analysis, the researcher examines voicelessness as a political, social and cultural challenge to subjugation. Recording her memories, Rana establishes a resisting voice and becomes known as The Voiceless. Interestingly, readers only know her name at the very end, in an indication that Rana's story is no different than any other refugee with any other name. Eventually, AlAmmar succeeds in using the motif of muteness in order to expose the disastrous result of the war especially after the Arab Spring.

Index Terms—Arab spring, trauma, voicelessness, identity, resistance, exposure

I. INTRODUCTION

It is scientifically acknowledged that experiencing trauma often negatively affects the victims' mental, spiritual and physical abilities as the memories continue to manipulate their sense of who they are and what they are worth. As a concept, trauma is "generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world" (Balaev, 2018, p. 360). Such inability to exist in the external world leaves the victims an easy prey for all sorts of racial, political and economic oppression. Such experiences feed on one's self-esteem leading to exclusion and eventually voicelessness. In other words, trauma as a controversial term is seen as an intruding experience that has the ability to disturb a person's emotional stability as well as his/her conception of the world. Scholars and scientists acknowledge the destructive consequences of trauma and continue to attempt to fully grasp its physical and mental dimensions in order to help victims continue living life as full-fledged human beings. Artists also see the urgency to produce aesthetic works devoted to do victims of trauma justice through retelling their stories and empowering them to resist. Eventually, intellectuals saw the need to establish an independent field of study which dedicate various resources and the efforts of creative and activist minds in order to make sense of victims' actual and metaphorical silence. As it was first developed in 1990s, Trauma studies aimed at exposing the challenge which a traumatic experience imposes on language, expression and meaning. According to Craps, trauma theory is "An area of cultural investigation that emerged in the early 1990s as a product of the so-called ethical turn affecting the humanities. It promised to infuse the study of literary and cultural texts with new relevance. Trauma theory confidently announced itself as an essential apparatus for understanding 'the real world' and even as a potential means for changing it for the better" (2014, p. 45).

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1955), Freud points out that hysteria as a psychological disorder is mainly caused by sexual assault and that hysteric symptoms such as contractures, paralyzes, hysterical attacks, chronic vomiting, anorexia and recurrent visual hallucination...etc. All these symptoms are the result of a repressed traumatic event (196-199). Freud's ideas are concerned with the impact of sexual exploitation on a person's psyche and mental health while this study elaborates on this by focusing on other factors including oppression, discrimination and violence and their severe outcomes on a person's psyche. Nevertheless, Freud's theory paved the way for a model that perceives trauma as a severe experience that is unspeakable and which exposes the traumatized person to a meaningless and fragmented life. Caruth, a pioneer in coining traditional model of trauma, applies a poststructural approach as a means to claim that trauma causes a lasting fragmentation of the consciousness and thus cannot be represented through the use of language. This view was challenged by a pluralistic model of trauma that suggests traumatic experience creates a reorientation of the consciousness as it produces a new knowledge about one's identity and the external world as well (Balaev, 2018, pp. 363-366). Subsequently, Caruth, defines trauma as "a blow to the tissues of the body—or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind—that results in injury or some other disturbance" (1995, p. 183). As she observes the recurrent breakdowns and anxiety felt by the traumatized person are acts of narration of the traumatic event and experience (Qing, 2020, p. 2). This means that memory is the box where the trauma resides and once these memories are brought to the

public the cause of the trauma can be revealed and treated. The mission of trauma theory was to bear witness to traumatic histories of victimized people.

The university professor Marder underscores that “some of the most influential and far-reaching new insights about trauma have come from a field that might appear to be far removed from it: literature and literary theory” (2006, p. 2). Furthermore, trauma studies sheds light on the psychological, cultural and rhetorical significance of trauma that is clear in society and the literature that represents it. Literature has proved to be useful instrument that deconstructs issues happening in peoples’ lives all around the world. The concept of trauma has occupied a vast space in the study of literature and literary criticism in the West since the Second World War and till now. It is important to highlight that:

Scholarship analyzes the complex psychological and social factors that influence the self’s comprehension of a traumatic experience and how such an experience shapes and is shaped by language. The formal innovations of texts both print and media, that display insights into the ways that identity, the unconscious, and remembering are influenced by extreme events thus remain a significant focus of the field (Mambrol, 2018).

It is true that literature may not heal the victims of trauma, yet it has the ability to reveal what causes it and to some degree alleviating the pain. As traumatized individuals often tend to hide their psychological pain and are reluctant to seek help, openly narrating similar experiences and aesthetically documenting them may encourage victims to open up and speak out. Consequently, trauma as a buzzword in various fields of study has simultaneously changed the genre of fiction in that “Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 3). The strong link between trauma theory and literature is very obvious in that novelists around the world and across time had and still have the desire to represent specific historical instances of trauma that in turn has given rise to several significant works that are labeled as trauma fiction.

Nevertheless, trauma theory was critiqued for being Eurocentric in that it focused on the sufferings of westerners while neglecting the painful experiences of other minorities. As a response to this, several postcolonial critics such as Gert Beulens Michael Rothberg and Roger Luckhurst called for “the transformation of trauma studies from a Eurocentric discipline to one capable of engaging with the multicultural and diasporic nature of contemporary culture” (Andermahr, 2015, p. 1). Likewise, Caruth suggested that “trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures” (1995, p. 11). Eventually wars and catastrophes influenced the production of a new category in fiction such as narratives of survival and persecution. Most often these narratives were based on survival’s testimonies of the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, as well as works about psychological impacts of colonialism and racism. These writings included traumatic instances of numerous people with different backgrounds. Trauma has informed the works of a number of novelists around the world like Toni Morrison, Marguerite Duras, Larry Heinemann, Jamaica Kincaid and many others.

On the global stage, interest in the representation of trauma carries moral weight in the struggle against injustice and war crimes that leave indelible marks on victims. Within Arabic literary fields, writing about trauma can be linked to the idea of commitment in that writers tend to the sufferings of Arab people while accentuating their shared desire to have a voice. Consequently, In the Arab diasporic literary scene, trauma is heavily depicted due to the long and violent history of violence witnessed by the Arab world. The Arab world went through several disastrous experiences ranging from colonialism, the Israeli/Arab conflict, civil wars, and political disputes. All these events marked a turning point in the history of the Arab region. Another event that brought many significant changes to some Arab countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Libya is the Arab Spring uprisings which played an influential role in the creation of a new category in literature called post- Arab Spring fiction. Such events have caused the dispersal of great numbers from the Arab population around the globe, this category of people was labeled “Arab diaspora”, since this paper is interested in the analysis of a diasporic text; it is important to define the concept of diaspora in order to understand the literary productions produced in this category.

In an article entitled “Twinning Comparative Literature and Arab Diaspora”, the authors state that “diaspora simply refers to the scattering of people from their own country, and the term ‘diaspora’ is derived from ‘scatter,’ which is a Greek term, and shows the dispersed citizens who are forced to flee their home country and live around the world in a new place” (Altharwane et al., 2020). The term diaspora was originally used to address certain people including the Jews and Armenians yet with time the term diaspora included other minorities. Arab diaspora as such include people who left their homes and lived abroad as exiles, refugees or immigrants. Arab writers’ appeals to write under the banner of diaspora was due to the freedom it gives them as Al Maleh (2009) states “diaspora...grants the Arab intellectual, regardless of the linguistic tools at his disposal, an open forum for raising his voice in protest or clarification” (p. 14). The need for a voice that is loud and clear and free from all restrictions has always been a dire need for Arabs as a means to reclaim their pain and history.

Correspondingly, Pederson, a lecturer of humanities at Boston University stresses that “literature may not be the only way of speaking trauma; it remains a valuable tool in the struggle to reclaim our most painful experiences” (2014, p. 350). Indeed, recent diasporic literature witnessed the heavy depiction of trauma which may be linked as mentioned earlier to authors’ need to express painful experiences in their narratives. Also the need and urge to claim pain is very apparent in recent diasporic fiction in that this act helps marginalized and silenced people to reclaim their pain, authors such as Alammar use their pen as an act of solidarity with others who underwent painful experiences. According to Remmler “In the act of reading, we are confronted with the contradiction that pain – itself unspeakable – becomes the most powerful expression of a historical event that seems to defy words” (1994, p. 217). When the denial of pain is a

torturing act, its acknowledgement in fiction is converted into a weapon that finds the roots of pain as a means to uproot them.

In the period when the Arab Spring was devouring the political scene in various Arab countries, the Arabic and diasporic literary arena was also witnessing the birth of varied corpus of fictional and non-fictional works that commented on the uprisings such as Maha Hassan's novel *Tubulul Hubb (Drums of Love)* published in 2012 which is the first novel on the situation in Syria, the novel addresses the uprisings in Syria using real events and real names of activists. The Egyptian revolution had a significant impact on the Egyptian novelist Mona Prince inspiring her novel "*Revolution is My Name (Ismi Thawra)*" that was published in 2012. Another compelling novel about the Egyptian revolution is Mohammad Rabie's *Otared* that features the dystopian reality of Egypt during the uprisings through mixing real and imaginary events. *Otared* captures Egypt as a dystopian place where violence and murder are normality. Similarly, Basma Abdel Azizi's novel *The Queue* published in 2016 is also a dystopian narrative on the Egyptian revolution featuring several themes including oppression and psychological violence. Yasmina Khadra's *The Dictator's Last Night* features a fictionalized day in the life of the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi before he was captured and killed, Khadra uses internal and external monologue techniques in order to reveal the dictator's confused behavior, focusing on his moments of anxiety in the midst of a torn reality these works are samples from the myriad of fiction written on the Arab Uprisings in the period right after the revolutions and few years later. Fiction written about the Arab Spring tackles various themes including violence, oppression as well as trauma.

It is important to note that Arab diasporic writers did not use their pens and imaginations to speak only about the sufferings of their people. But they also attempted to voice all Arabs' painful experiences through their fiction. This endeavor is primarily linked to their shared desire and need for change as well as freedom in all aspects of life, people saw that the act of revolting against authoritarianism brings the potential for a better future. As intellectuals and active members in their societies, some novelists responded to these upheavals in their literary works; others even joined the revolting people in the streets such as Nawal El Saadawi and Ahdaf Soueif.

II. SILENCE IS A SENSE: OTHERNESS AND EXCLUSION

In an online conversation between AlAmmar and Alhinai, the founder of Sekka magazine, the former states that:

What I wanted to do, particularly in my new book, was ask the reader to set aside their learned assumptions about the narratives of refugees or Arabs or Muslims, and receive the truths that the protagonist is attempting to convey. And in a broader and metafictional sense, I hope that's how Arab literature can be received — as expressions of multiple, coexisting and contradictory truths rather than teleological narratives (2021, np).

That being said, AlAmmar refuses the simple reading of Arab literature as mere plots where characters act only to follow the plot designed by the author. Instead she insists that Arab literature contains a myriad of truths presented and not fabricated by writers. Additionally, a teleological form in this sense is defined as "a relatively firm iron-clad sequence of events, which robs the events themselves of their intrinsic interest and intensity and which excludes other events (Goodheart, 1978, p. 82). In order to reverse this assumption about Arab literature, AlAmmar uses her novel *Silence is a Sense* as a counter narrative to the stereotypical image of Arab literature as teleological stories, she gives a loud and clear voice to her marginalized and othered protagonist. Who was unable to even to hear her own thoughts. The author believes that Arab authors play the role of a channel that facilitates the encounter between the world of the text and the reader. *Silence is a Sense* (2021) speaks about the 2010 Syrian Arab Spring while Syrians lacked freedom of speech and endured panopticon-like conditions. AlAmmar is investigating trauma in order to offer the victims a chance to turn their pain and haunting memories into motivators to reclaim life; a life of individuals as opposed to a life of victims, subjects of their own realities as opposed to objects of their memories. Thus *Silence is a Sense* negates the teleological form of stories where "the events and the behavior of the characters are driven, not by intrinsic human motivations and natural causes, but by the need to follow the plot" (Talin, 2021, np).

The work as a counter narrative focuses on Rana, who is a Syrian refugee hopping to find asylum in England. Through that, she maps safe zones for herself in the nameless city where she lives; these safe places are set as borders she cannot cross. She justifies her detachment from others as she declares that "It isn't like that where I come from. There (in Syria), you have your boundary and I have mine and if the lines are crossed, it means that a fucking disaster has occurred. It means there was a bomb and people are running and they don't care who they touch and knock along the way" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 27). The war deprived Rana of the simple pleasure of being around people and having a normal social life since she is deeply traumatized first by the memories of blood and death of the Syrian war, as well as by the marginalization of dislocation and sexual harassment.

Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* calls the act of remembering the traumatic event "intrusion" where "The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep" (1997, p. 51). Rana's traumas are deeply fixed and intruded within her and making her hyper vigilant when around others. Her spontaneous existence is imprisoned and tangled within the vicious web of traumatic events and memories. The author aims to further substantiate Syrian misery as she portrays the heroine as someone who wishes to be invisible as a way of avoiding any encounters that may trigger trauma. In this, Rana's wish represents a lot of the Syrian people who compensated their visibility for the sake of being able to live sheltered from memories. Assimilation, culturally and politically, often end

up traumatizing such others who abide to it thinking they are free of their old traumatic intrusions. For Rana, this is not an identity denial attempt but a calculated strategy to avoid re-narrating a story that is not hers and reintroducing an identity that is not true to her inner self.

Instead of having real contact with others, the protagonist creates imaginary bonds with her neighbors as she finds solace in watching them from her windows, knowing their every step and deepest secrets. Early in the novel, we learn that the protagonist watches her neighbors only to pass time, yet when she learns some of their hidden secrets she feels that she crossed her borders and that she is too involved in other's lives, In that she feels terrified to create real connections with others as if her exposure to people will put her in harm's way as shown in her medical diagnosis "patient (Rana) shows a distinct lack of trust in others, imagining all persons she comes into contact with to have malicious intent" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 51). An instance on Rana's reluctance to contact others is when her neighbor's daughter, Chloe asks her if she can come to her flat, Rana shakes her head violently as a refusal as she thinks that "No one comes to my flat. Ever. It's my place, my sanctuary, my hiding hole. It is the only place, in the entire world, where I feel halfway safe. So no, she cannot come, no one can come there" (p. 58). Due to her trauma, Rana likes to have control over everything surrounding her and that is why she considers her apartment as her real home and the only place where she can be safe because it is the only place that she knows every detail in it and nothing there can cause her harm. This being said, Rana perceives peoples attempts to be close to her as an act of intrusion in her life which in turn make her alert and uncomfortable.

Additionally, Rana hides the fact of being Muslim and does not like to be near the Muslim community as she thinks that exposing herself as a Muslim will make others intrude in her life. She even expresses her discomfort when others perceive her as a Muslim especially when the imam tries to talk to her "does he think he can fix me, this Imam in this little city where all I want is to be invisible? Does he think he can cure me with religion, tell me everything is going to be okay does he think anything he says could actually make me feel better?" (2021, p. 38) Rana's exposure to different types of trauma in various places made her lose trust in everything and everybody around her, things that are basics in ordinary people's lives turned into meaningless acts of survival such as friendship and belief.

Despite the fact that Rana is traumatized and cannot trust her mind and memories, she is aware that her trauma is hidden somewhere in the unconscious sphere of her brain as she narrates "I have a box too. In my head. It's where I keep the things that are too much, the things that don't make sense. Images and sounds and smells and textures languish in boxes, stuffed and secreted, stacked up in a room in my mind" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 12). The protagonist's constant feeling that she is in danger or will be harmed is termed hyperarousal and it is one of the many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in which the traumatized person feels danger at all times (Herman, 1997, p. 50). Rana feels the need to be alert to everything around her so as not to be surprised by anything and this is illustrated in her constant search for bombs in the sky of England, in her country a bomb can land on anyone any time. The protagonist's memories also play a decisive role in keeping her on the lookout. It is true that Rana's memories appear as fragments that she herself cannot be sure of but they give a clear picture of the arduous journey she underwent. All the bad memories of bombs and death in Syria, overloaded rafts overseas, filthy detention centers in European countries cage the protagonist in her own fear of going through that again, in that she finds refuge in silence and isolation.

Rana is unable to cope with the idea that she is free to go wherever she wants; thus by staying alone in her dark flat she reduces herself into a scarred mouse hiding in his safe hole. Her fear is unspeakable and thus language for Rana falls short in providing her with a means to evacuate her mind. She finds writing her thoughts more useful than speaking them, the fact is told in her diagnosis when she reached England and was admitted to a hospital due to severe health problems including anemia, dehydration, tuberculosis and other diseases she got on her journey across seas. Rana responded to the doctors' medical tests via writing as she "exhibited a hysterical mutism" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 50).

Under the pseudonym "the voiceless", Rana's confrontation with her own trauma starts. Despite this "voiced" action, she is not healed yet to step out of the anonymous comfort zone. Her identity continues to hide behind namelessness till the end of the novel as the author reveals her name in an indication of existence and direct invitation of resistance. As Rana's editor requires her to delve deeper in her darkest memories, she finds the power to recall past events and realities. She hallucinates about family members, daydreams about her beloved Khalid and contemplates about how the revolution turned into a civil war. On the right path yet not fully equipped to rise from the ashes, Rana fought the psychological pain caused by such memories via self-mutilation. One incident for such reaction is when Hassan, the shop owner was killed in front of her, she explains that "The water beats down, hot water to drive out the ice in my veins. I have shaving razors in my hand. There are slashes, deep ones on both forearms" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 139). Herman underlines that for traumatized individuals, physical pain is much more bearable than emotional pain (1997, p. 131). Besides physical pain, it can be said that Rana is healing her wounded soul through writing her memories to the public which in turn can alleviate her pain. In other words the act of sharing your pain with others may reduce its impact on you. "The flight into exile results in a loss of identity, whereby the refugee as the ultimate stateless person comes to be defined by their facelessness, not their humanity" (as quoted in Piacentini, 9). Rana as such is seen as an other and a stranger in the English city she lives in and this with all her traumatic past puts her in a struggle with her true identity and where does she belong, Herman underscores that:

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship,

from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living (1997, p. 68).

Herman stresses the effect of trauma on one's self perception and their sense of belonging which is reflected in Rana's status as an outcast. She was obliged to leave her homeland escaping literal death in Syria but she ended up suffering psychological and emotional death all the way to England facing various threats ranging from the vandalism of the nearby mosque, outright violent attacks by a group of racists. The protagonist expresses how the police reacted on the first incident when the mosque was violated "no sirens blazing like when they came for Helen, just a lone squad car with a couple of officers on the pavement taking statements" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 92). She expected England to be more "helpful" yet instead she was "mocked on arrival, pushed around, poked and prodded, assumed to be some stupid sheep herder begging for scraps off her Majesty's table" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 95). Many alike incidents increase the clash between Rana and her new external world. Desperately in need for inclusion and definition, Rana chooses assimilation as a way. She even gets rid of her Hijab as a means to be accepted and not recognized as an outsider. Later on in the novel, spontaneous relations start to narrow the gap between Rana and others. Even though she is unwilling to establish any friendships with others, her loneliness is intruded by Adam who tries to get to know her more believing that she can hear and speak. Receiving Chloe, the abused teenager, in her flat is another step towards Rana's challenging trauma and fighting for a life where she is in full control of who she is, what she deserves and is capable of. Rana further breaks the barriers between her and others when she rushes to save a choking old man, unlocking her voice for the first time since she lived in that neighborhood. Slowly but firmly, the walls of her dark past get destroyed as she overcomes the terror of being involved in anything which acknowledges her persistence to fight memories' muteness and marginalization. Participating in organized protests against Xenophobia and calling for equality and justice in addition to using her real name to sign her article, mark a level of political self-awareness and mental defiance. Being able to identify herself, Rana was also able to be socially active in the host society, she is also encouraged by Josie to participate in a writing contest called 'short fiction award' that involves submitting short fiction works. Consequently, Rana manages to voice herself and others who went through the same experiences.

III. CONCLUSION

Indeed, Trauma has the capacity to shatter one's identity and make him/her a dissociated individual suffering from severe mental and physical problems. Nevertheless, AlAmmar challenges this fact by extracting the power of reconstructing oneself from the ashes caused by trauma, she wraps up her novel by subverting the exposure to trauma into a weapon that empowers the victims, trauma itself paves the way for the traumatized to discover his/her real abilities. Silence is a Sense serves as an evidence on that "Trauma... is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Effectively AlAmmar heard that cry in her character as she manages to tell her readers what it means to live in constant terror under the heavy experience of brutal and traumatic experiences. She successfully captured the fragmentation caused by the traumatic event which left Rana with a fragmented sense of identity; she was reduced into a mere voyeur of others' lives disassociated from the world around her. Through using the motif of silence and showing that writing one's bad memories has a therapeutic effect AlAmmar made the unspeakable spoken. AlAmmar's study of trauma in *Silence is a Sense* offered Rana a chance to shift her status from another into an active subject; she was also able to turn her pain and haunting memories into a means to reclaim life. Thus, AlAmmar's novel subverts the effects of trauma and gives it positive connotations. In other words the author offers her view on that experiencing trauma can be handled and turned into a motivating power toward recognition and change.

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