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ECHOES OF SUFFERING: TRAUMA AND HEALING IN ZOULFA KATOUGH'S *AS LONG AS THE LEMON TREES GROW* THROUGH CATHY CARUTH'S TRAUMA THEORY

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 24/04/2025 Accepted: 27/04/2025	Zoulfa Katouh's <i>As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow</i> offers a poignant exploration of personal and collective trauma against the backdrop of the Syrian revolution. This paper employs Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to examine how trauma manifests in the protagonist's fractured memory, temporal disorientation, and psychological doubling. The paper argues that trauma in Katouh's novel is not only a product of physical violence but also of moral conflict, survivor's guilt, and forced displacement. Healing, although partial and uncertain, emerges through acts of testimony, memory reconstruction, and connection with others. This study contributes to trauma discourse by illustrating how contemporary war literature provides a platform for voicing unspeakable suffering while offering a model for witnessing and recovery.
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In *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, Zoulfa Katouh (2022) weaves a tale of loss, resistance, and resilience through the eyes of Salama Kassab, a pharmacy student-turned-volunteer medic in Homs, Syria. Set during the early years of the Syrian civil war, the novel illustrates the devastating impact of trauma on individuals and communities. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, particularly her conception of trauma as an experience that returns in belated, fragmented ways, offers a rich framework to unpack the psychological and narrative structures in Katouh's work. This paper explores how trauma disrupts Salama's consciousness, identity, and temporality, and how healing begins through narrative reclamation and relational care.

Cathy Caruth (1996), a prominent figure in trauma studies, views trauma not merely as a psychological wound but as an event that resists full integration into consciousness. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth writes that trauma is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (p. 4). It returns in flashbacks, nightmares, and other delayed manifestations. She also emphasizes the ethical dimensions of trauma, highlighting the importance of listening to traumatic testimony and bearing witness to the pain of others. Trauma, Caruth argues, disrupts temporality and leads to dissociative symptoms and a breakdown of linear understanding.

Salama's narrative in Katouh's (2022) novel is laced with temporal and spatial disjunctions that reflect the inner disarray of a traumatized mind. One of the most prominent indicators of trauma is Salama's perception of time: days blur, and memories return in intrusive and disjointed forms, especially those concerning her family and her life before the war. The narrative does not proceed linearly; rather, it oscillates between present horrors and idyllic past memories. This non-linear structure mirrors Caruth's (1996) assertion that trauma is not fully grasped in the moment but recurs through haunting returns. Salama's repeated recollections of her mother and brother—particularly the moments of their deaths—act as traumatic flashbacks, episodes that are relived rather than remembered.

Perhaps the most striking representation of trauma in the novel is the presence of Khawf, a hallucinatory figure who embodies Salama's fear and survival instinct. Khawf is not merely a figment of her imagination but a projection of her fractured psyche—an externalized inner dialogue. This psychological doubling, a form of dissociation, is a common response to extreme trauma (Caruth, 1996). Khawf emerges following the death of Salama's family and during her exposure to ongoing violence. He frequently urges her to flee, suppress empathy, and prioritize her own safety, illustrating the moral and emotional fragmentation that trauma inflicts. This internal split captures Caruth's notion of trauma as an unassimilated experience that creates paradoxical and self-destructive coping mechanisms.

Salama's trauma is also shaped by survivor's guilt. She perceives her survival not as fortunate, but as a betrayal of those she could not save. This guilt manifests in her refusal to leave Syria, her obsessive volunteerism at the hospital, and her hallucinations of the dead. Each wounded child or fallen comrade becomes a mnemonic trigger, plunging her into cycles of guilt and remembrance (Katouh, 2022).

Caruth (1996) highlights the ethical imperative to listen to survivors of trauma, while also acknowledging the survivor's burden of expressing the inexpressible. Salama is caught in this tension: she longs to testify but finds herself silenced. Her internal conversations with Khawf and external hesitations with others reflect the unspeakability of trauma. Over time, however, storytelling emerges as an essential part of the healing process. Salama's growing relationship with Kenan offers a turning point—he becomes a witness to her suffering not by interrogation, but through compassion and presence. This dynamic enables Salama to begin reclaiming her voice and narrative.

Caruth (1996) argues that healing begins when trauma is shared—when the survivor finds a listener capable of holding their testimony. The act of narrating trauma helps to re-integrate memory, affirm agency, and reconstruct a sense of time. While Salama's healing remains partial—her trauma never fully resolves—her tentative steps toward remembrance and testimony represent meaningful recovery.

Salama's trauma is also gendered. As a young woman, she faces the added burdens of societal expectations, the threat of sexual violence, and the pressure to embody both protector and nurturer. The loss of her mother intensifies her emotional isolation and deprives her of a maternal anchor. Through Caruth's (1996) lens, trauma is always shaped by personal history and cultural context. Salama's resilience is also gendered—expressed through emotional labor, caregiving, and relational strength rather than brute defiance.

Katouh's (2022) portrayal of displacement aligns with Caruth's assertion that trauma extends beyond the initiating event. Salama's decision to flee Syria and her subsequent journey into exile illuminate the trauma of forced migration—marked by dislocation from home, language, and identity. Even in safety, she remains tethered to the past. The lemon trees, a recurring symbol, evoke both nostalgia and loss, representing the paradox of home as both haven and haunting.

Exile becomes a liminal space, where healing is possible but not guaranteed. Salama's physical movement toward safety contrasts with her psychological entrapment in trauma, illustrating Caruth's (1996) concept of belatedness. Her past remains alive within her, even as the external threats subside.

By the novel's conclusion, Salama's narrative becomes an act of resistance. Through testimony, she challenges dehumanization and historical erasure. Her voice, like those of many survivors, insists on being heard. Caruth (1996) views testimony as not just cathartic, but

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political—demanding recognition and accountability. Katouh's (2022) novel thus functions as a literary vessel of testimony, amplifying voices often excluded from dominant narratives of war.

In conclusion, *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* is a powerful narrative of trauma and fragile healing. Through Caruth's trauma theory, Salama's story reveals how trauma disrupts time, selfhood, and memory, while also illustrating the restorative potential of storytelling and relational care. Though healing remains incomplete, Katouh affirms the enduring human capacity to resist despair through love, memory, and testimony. By anchoring trauma in lived experience, Katouh not only humanizes abstract statistics but models an ethical, affective mode of witnessing. In doing so, her novel echoes Caruth's call to hear "the wound that cries out"—a cry demanding remembrance, testimony, and moral response.

REFERENCES

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