Literary Voice: *A Peer Reviewed Journal of English Studies (ISSN 2277-4521)*
Number 26, Volume 1, March 2026, https://literaryvoice.in
Indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection ESCI, Cosmos, ESJI, I20R, CiteFactor, InfoBase

Narrative Trauma and Resilience in Radwa Ashour's *The Woman from Tantoura*

[1]**Dr. Jasleen Kaur Sahota,** Assistant Professor, Centre for Distance and Online Education, University of Jammu, Jammu (J & K), India. jasleensahota@gmail.com
[2]**Simran Jaideep Kour,** Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu, Jammu (J&K), India. simranjaideep26@gmail.com
DOI: https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2026.26.1.31

Abstract

The world has witnessed multiple wars since the last century. These, including the Holocaust and Nakba have left innumerable individuals traumatised and displaced. The present paper will examine The Woman from Tantoura by Radwa Ashour through the prism of trauma theories of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. The discussion will revolve around the persona of Ruqayya whose tale of suffering and trauma symbolise the plight of many Palestinians who witnessed Nakba and its long-term devastating effects on their lives. This paper explores how trauma is constructed and manifested through fragmented memory, enforced silence and the act of witnessing, ultimately enabling the protagonist to reclaim agency over her narrative. The paper will also analyse Peirre Nora's concept of sites of memories and explicate the novel as a site for the collective memory of Palestinian displacement, resistance, and survival. By doing so, the study underscores the political and emotional significance of narrative as a medium of memory, mourning, and resilience in post-Nakba Palestinian literature.
Keywords: Memory, Forgetting, Trauma, Nakba, Sites of memory.

Introduction

Palestinian literature has long been a powerful medium for expressing the collective trauma of dispossession, exile, and occupation. Novels such as Ghassan Kanafani's *Return to Haifa* and *Men in the Sun* explore the psychological toll of displacement and the struggle to preserve identity amid loss. Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* presents intergenerational trauma through a family's experience of the Nakba and subsequent conflicts, while Sahar Khalifeh's *Wild Thorns* portrays the daily ruptures of life under occupation and the moral complexities of resistance. These works underscore how trauma in Palestinian narratives is not only a personal affliction but also a political condition, deeply embedded in the historical and social fabric. However, despite the rich body of Palestinian fiction dealing with trauma, there is limited scholarship applying psychoanalytic trauma theory, in particular Cathy Caruth's framework to women's narratives like Radwa Ashour's *The Woman from Tantoura*. This paper seeks to fill that gap by examining how the novel constructs trauma through fragmented memory, silence,

Article History:Full Article Received on 31 May 2025. Peer Review completed on 18th June 2025, Article accepted on 25 June, 2025. First published: March 2026.

and the act of witnessing.

Historically, the Palestinian displacement was a result of British imperialism and colonisation that allowed the Jews to settle in their homeland. The Palestinian Catastrophe, or al-Nakba, refers to the period between 1947 and 1948, during which the British Mandate over Palestine came to an end and the State of Israel was declared. This transition was marked by widespread violence and the forced displacement of approximately 750,000 Palestinians by Zionist militias, resulting in mass exile and the depopulation of hundreds of Palestinian villages. The generation that lived through these events is often referred to as the "Nakba generation," characterised by experiences of dispossession, statelessness, and enduring nostalgia for a lost homeland. Although the Nakba denotes a specific historical event, its consequences continue to shape Palestinian life and identity, rendering it not merely a historical moment but an ongoing condition of trauma and exile.

The Palestinian experience is frequently examined within postcolonial frameworks, yet it diverges in crucial ways from traditional models of decolonisation. Unlike other formerly colonised nations, Palestine has not achieved national liberation or autonomy; rather, it remains under the military domination of a settler-colonial regime. The Israeli state continues to exercise political, economic, and cultural control over Palestinian territories and populations, perpetuating the conditions of occupation and dispossession. In the case of Palestine, the Nakba persists as a lived and continuous catastrophe, and the work assumes larger significance in the wake of the decimation of Palestine and the continuing humanitarian crisis since Oct 2023.

Discussion

Radhwa Ashour (1946–2014) was a celebrated Egyptian novelist, scholar, educator, and activist whose richly personal and politically resonant works chronicled her commitment to human rights and academic freedom. She is most famous for her Granada trilogy, which is a testament to her Arab identity. *The Woman from Tantoura* unfolds through the first-person perspective of Ruqayya al-Rayyis, a Palestinian woman whose life is irrevocably shaped by the trauma of the Nakba. At the age of thirteen, Ruqayya witnesses the massacre of her father, brothers, and fellow villagers during the 1948 Tantoura massacre. This foundational trauma launches a narrative marked by exile, displacement, and persistent silence. As the novel progresses, Ruqayya recounts her life across various geographies, from the refugee camps in Lebanon, to besieged Palestinian towns, which highlight the dispossession that characterises the post-Nakba Palestinian experience.

Thus, the novel becomes a powerful articulation of post-Nakba trauma, wherein personal memory intersects with collective history. Ashour employs Ruqayya's interior monologue and retrospective narration to emphasize the unresolved nature of trauma, aligning with Cathy Caruth's assertion that trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (1996, 4). The disjunctures in Ruqayya's memory and the recurrence of traumatic flashbacks illustrate this temporal collapse. Her suffering is not isolated but representative of a broader Palestinian condition marked by statelessness, historical erasure, and multigenerational displacement. In *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, Angelika Bammer sees displacement as "the separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, exiles or

expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture" (Bammer xi).

The novel presents Ruqayya's struggle, her life across various cities, living under the constant fear of losing a loved one, followed by the bitter truth of never returning home. Through this novel, she portrays the planned ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, whose identity underwent tremendous change in the wake of their displacement. This novel truly captures this planned strategy of ethnic cleansing by the Israeli authority. This has parallels with the expulsion of Rohingya Muslims by the armed forces of Myanmar between the years 2016 to 2017 which led to the fleeing of these people to different countries such as India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand.

Ruqayya's narration is non-linear and often fragmented, reflecting the psychological disruption typical of trauma narratives. Her silence, particularly in the aftermath of the massacre, exemplifies the kind of psychological numbing and dissociation Judith Herman identifies in trauma survivors (269). Ruqayya admits that she never told her story, not because she forgot, but because the weight of witnessing was too immense to express. It is only later in life, when her son Hassan encourages her to "testify" rather than merely "compose," that she begins to narrate her experiences (Ashour 162). This moment marks a significant transformation in her subjectivity, as she moves from passive survivor to active witness, reclaiming agency over her narrative. Through his intervention, a voice that might have otherwise remained unheard was brought to light. The novel though focused primarily on Ruqayya's voice also sheds light upon the plight of various other characters.

Trauma is derived from a Greek word "τραῦμα" (trauma) which means "wound" or "injury". It was a medical term used to "refer to an injury to a living tissue caused by extrinsic agent" (Bui et al. 2). In the present day, this word is not only limited to the physical realm but extends its territory to psychological realm as well. In 1899, for the first time Oppenheim applied this term extending its meaning to reflect "clinical neuroses" suggesting that this term is not limited to its physical aspect. It is a psychological response to a traumatic experience whether single or multiple, short termed or prolonged (Bui et al. 2). In the opening lines of *The Woman from Tantoura*, Ruqayya reflects on a moment from her past, remarking:

> I was standing in front of him on the shore, but when I recall the scene I see myself on the threshing floors, among the stalk of wheat, spying on him while he is unaware of me. I know that the threshing floors were on the east side, separated from the sea by the houses of the village and the railroad, and that I was standing on the shore. I was tempted to run away, but I didn't run" (Ashour 1).

This passage exemplifies what Cathy Caruth identifies as the temporal and spatial dislocation characteristic of traumatic memory. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth argues that trauma is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event… but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (1996, 4). Ruqayya's confusion between actual and imagined locations where she mentions standing on the shore yet remembering herself in the threshing floors reveals this belatedness and fragmentation. Her memory resists coherence and instead it presents a distortion of time and space which are shaped by the psychic ruptures of trauma. Moreover, the compulsion to remember inaccurately points to the mind's struggle to process an overwhelming experience that could not be fully registered at the moment of its occurrence. This moment

carries within it an undercurrent of unease, pointing towards the profound losses to come. In a definition of Trauma, Caruth "Caruth draws on Freud to argue that trauma's impact lies in its belatedness as it keeps returning across space and time cross-temporal intrusion" (1995, 9). Ruqayya's hesitation to run, despite the instinct, suggests the paralysing effect of traumatic experience wherein action becomes arrested and memory begins to fracture. Thus, Ashour's narrative from the very beginning aligns with Caruth's theoretical framework, demonstrating how trauma is less about what is remembered and more about what cannot be fully grasped, even as it returns through distorted recollection of the past. The night the Israeli armies attacked the city of Tantoura was a dreadful night. Ruqayya explains how her mother asked her to leave enough food and water for their livestock in the hope that they would return to their homes and that the terror and displacement was temporary not knowing that they would never be able to return home ever. That night was such a night she could never forget but at the same time she never wants to remember. Ruqayya along with her mother, Wisal, Abed and their mother travelled by foot in hope of escaping the chaos but were caught by the Israeli forces. The natives were asked to form two queues- one consisting of men and the other consisting of women, children and old men. Later these men were taken somewhere far away and shot by dead by the forces.

The people standing in the other queue were loaded into trucks and taken away. Ruqayya saw the dead bodies of her father and her two brothers lying alongside the pile of dozens of other men who were killed ruthlessly. She asked her mother to look outside the truck pointing towards their dead bodies. Her mother remained traumatised for the rest of her life and chose denial as a defense mechanism. She firmly believed that her sons and husband were held captives somewhere in the prisons of Egypt. Ruqayya was so shocked by this event that she wasn't able to speak for days. That one single night changed everything. She saw herself escaping the murder by chance when most of the people she knew and mattered to her died.

Robert Jay Lifton in his essay "The Concept of the Survivors" describes the survivor as "one who has come into contact with death…remained alive" (Lifton 479), and this survival leads to psychological themes including guilt about having survived, psychic numbing, and the inability to move beyond the images of death, bloodshed and killings. The survivor who survives by chance is filled with guilt and Lifton agrees when he says that this guilt "over what one has done to, or not done for, the dying while oneself surviving" (Lifton 496). Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* writes, "traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (33). When a person experiences a traumatic event, he/she is unable to process the event, thus taking refuge in mechanism such as denial, shutting down of emotions. Trauma and memory are closely linked. Trauma, in certain cases especially cases of prolonged trauma is accompanied by the repression of the memory of the traumatic event. Ruqayya was also a victim of prolonged trauma suffering from a very tender age till she reached seventy. She and her mother both wanted to suppress the traumatic memory of Nakba but used different methods to do so. Ruqayya writes:

> I was with the boys on the train and yet I wasn't, because ever since that day when they loaded us into the truck and I saw my father and brothers on the pile, I have remained there, unmoving, even if it didn't seem like it…I wonder, what does a woman do who feels that she has remained alive by chance, by the purest chance? (Ashour 70)

This passage reveals how Ruqayya remains psychologically arrested in the moment of her

trauma, unable to separate past horror from her present reality. The fragmentation of her memory is also evident in moments of speechlessness, such as when Ashour writes, "She paused, mouth open, but no words came" (150). This silence is not merely an emotional pause, but a manifestation of the trauma's inexpressibility. It represents the idea that trauma defies verbal articulation and instead emerges as a void, a gap in language.

Caruth's work on trauma theory emphasises the fragmented and belated nature of traumatic memory. According to Caruth, trauma is not experienced fully in the moment but returns later in disjointed, involuntary fragments that resist integration into coherent narrative form (61). This is vividly illustrated in this novel, particularly through the fragmented recollections of Ruqayya, the protagonist. Herman talks about the ability of trauma to silence the victim. She argues that "the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection… Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (254). Ruqayya is silenced not only by the traumatic witnessing of massacres, displacement, and loss, but also by the prolonged isolation and fragmentation that follow. Her initial inability to speak of the events she endured underscores how trauma severs her from both her sense of self and her community. However, as Herman emphasises, recovery necessitates empowerment and relational connection; Ruqayya's act of narrating her life becomes a form of reclaiming agency and restoring bonds with memory, identity, and a broader collective history. Through telling her story, she resists erasure and begins the process of healing within the context of bearing witness.

Ruqayya is exposed to prolonged trauma experiencing it in her hometown, Beirut, Shatila and Sabra. She goes numb and silent the first time she witnesses it in Tantoura. She resists discussing it with anyone. Thus, she is unable to heal from the trauma. Ruqayya chose silence as a defense mechanism while her mother chose denial as her defense mechanism. However, Ruqayya had a helping hand by her son who wanted to help her get out of the trauma by writing the account of what she saw and felt. He wanted her to use the power of language and narrative to overcome her trauma. It is only by remembering trauma one can move to the next step of healing.

Such moments affirm Caruth's assertion that trauma often overwhelms language, rendering it almost ineffective in capturing the truth of the event. The narrative structure itself becomes a site of trauma, disrupted when Ruqayya's son Hassan urges her to tell her story: "Mother, what I am asking for isn't a composition but testimony… tell it however you like" (162). This appeal to testify unsettles the flow of narration, creating a rupture that mirrors the difficulty of bearing witness to traumatic experience. However, Ashour does not portray memory as purely destructive. Instead, in a powerful reimagining of trauma's aftermath, Ruqayya asserts, "Memory does not kill. … memory changes from a whirlpool … to a sea we can swim in" (186). This transformation from chaos to clarity and navigability suggests that trauma, though initially fragmentary and overwhelming, can ultimately be reshaped through narrative into a source of strength and resilience. However, not all memories are processed with clarity and trauma erupts with great emotional intensity. In a moment of emotional overload, Ruqayya screams:

> What logic is there in my running after the memory that has escaped, trying to flee from itself? Do I want to kill it so that I can live, or am I trying to revive it even if I die because . . . because why? I suddenly scream: Damn memory, damn its mother and

> father, damn the sky … I saw the flies … a smell and clouds of flies" (149).

The sensory overload in this passage which is highlighted by disjointed imagery further confirms Caruth's claim that trauma often re-emerges somatically, bypassing language altogether. Through these fragmented flashbacks, silences, and disordered expressions, Ashour constructs a narrative deeply attuned to the traumatic logic Caruth describes as something akin to a narrative where testimony becomes both a burden and a potential path toward survival (1995, 162). Judith Herman argues that "the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness" (23). She further explains that dissociation often functions as an internal mechanism by which traumatized individuals manage overwhelming experiences, though this process may also contribute to their silence (46).

This silencing surfaces through repeated moments of speechlessness. For example, when Ruqayya attempts to convey the depth of her horror, she "paused, mouth open, but no words came" (Ashour 150). This moment echoes Herman's observation that traumatic memories cannot always be communicated through language and instead emerge as an absence. Thus, a silence bears witness to a pain which defies articulation. Ruqayya's inability to speak highlights how trauma can undermine narrative agency, compelling survivors into mute submission rather than allowing them to articulate their suffering.

Telling the story of suffering and survival is very important in terms of trauma and memory. When one tells the story of his/her suffering, one tries to come out of the shackles of the traumatic past and move on to the process of healing. Narrating their horrific experiences is healing but is a deeply consuming process for the survivor. Herman argues:

The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know ones buried truth in order to be able to live one's life (71).

Documenting one's experience; or testimonies are a way of providing new spaces to suppressed narratives of Palestinians whose voices were not included in the mainstream trauma literature. Hasan is aware of the importance of his mother's testimony which will be an asset for the future Palestinian generation. He says,

> Tell the story write about what you have seen and lived and heard, and what you think about. If it's hard to write, then tell it orally and record what you say, and afterward we'll put it on paper. This is important, Mother, more important than you imagine (Ashour 171).

However, this task was very difficult for her mother. She never wanted to write what she witnessed.

The testimony allows them not only to remember but also to protect them against the horrific past. She further asserts that one needs to remember and delve deep into the mind to dig the long-buried devastating occurrence that caused them trauma in the first place. Narrating their horrific experiences is healing but is a deeply consuming process for the survivor. Ruqayya's fragmented and emotionally restrained narrative exemplifies this healing capacity for the narrative. Caruth argues that trauma is not fully grasped when it occurs but returns belatedly, haunting the survivor (1995, 17). This is reflected in Ruqayya's disjointed recollections and her recurring avoidance of emotionally charged memories, such as the Tantoura massacre. Her hesitance and silence are not signs of forgetfulness but of a deeper psychological struggle to

comprehend and narrate what was too overwhelming to process in the moment. The narrative's structure itself mimics trauma, marked by gaps, repetition, and fragmentation, emphasising how the past is never truly past for the survivor.

Her journey through Lebanon, Beirut, and Palestine is not merely physical but an ongoing confrontation with her unresolved trauma. As she names places and people, she gradually reclaims fragments of her shattered identity, yet the act of narration continuously destabilizes her. Herman's theory that trauma silences and isolates survivors is evident in Ruqayya's initial emotional numbness and her detachment from those around her. Yet, by slowly articulating her memories, however incomplete or elusive, Ruqayya moves toward what Herman calls "in her healing, the survivor reclaims her voice" (195) illustrating the paradox of healing through the very act that retraumatises.

Her testimony does not recount events in a linear or reasoned way; it arrives as disjointed narrative. Through her stuttering memory, Ashour visualises Caruth's insight: "it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us…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 (1996, 4). Caruth emphasises that testimony does more than recount trauma; it transforms it, allowing ruptured experiences to acquire communal recognition. Also, Hasan's intervention facilitates a shift from isolated memory to public testimony, signalling a movement from fragmentation to articulation. Through this dialogic witnessing, the novel enacts Caruth's idea that trauma must be "heard in testimony," and only through such bearing can traumatic experiences begin to be remade into communal history (1996, 75).

Ruqayya's recollection of everyday traditions through rituals, songs, and symbols underscores how cultural continuity and psychic fragmentation co-exist in post-Nakba narratives. The mundane becomes unspeakable not by erasure but through evocative haunting, and through these fragments, the novel creates a map of loss that goes beyond the traumatic event to encompass disrupted life worlds and cultural identity. Ruqayya recalls a childhood encounter with a Romani fortune-teller:

> There was a woman … who put a basket of seashells in front of her … 'Blow on them and give them back to me and I will read your fortune.' … That seemed very exciting, and she herself seemed different, arousing curiosity by those green marks on her face (Ashour 10).

This memory is rich with sensory detail, yet it centers around a simple childhood ritual. According to Caruth, trauma is not only about catastrophic events but may be mirrored in the fragmentation of memory itself, where the ordinary becomes uncanny through its repetition. Ruqayya's recollection of this minor but meaningful ritual carries a nostalgia about the lost innocence of her village life, only preserved in fragments of memory. Her ability to remember not only the violent incidents but also such peripheral cultural scenes demonstrate how trauma dislocates memory, broadening the category of what is "haunting." Ruqayya's memory slips between the ordinary and the traumatic, showing how even mundane cultural practices become imbued with meaning as signifiers for a lost world.

Another deeply evocative image is the inherited iron key: "Later on I would learn that most of the women of the camp carried the keys to their houses, just as my mother did" (Ashour 74). Taken together, this image of Palestinian women wearing keys around their necks represents

both a cultural ritual and a resonant emblem of dispossession. Pierre Nora, a French historian is a very important personality who has worked in the field of collective memory studies. He is widely known for the use of his concept of lieu de memoire- sites of memory- that he gave in his book Les lieux de memoire- Realms of Memory. He describes them as "simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial…they enclose and protect, but they also mark limits, interrupt time, and open history up to new periods and eras. They are material, symbolic, and functional all at once" (Nora 14).

Conclusion

In Ruqayya's narrative, the key is not merely a personal object but a cultural artifact that holds in tension memory, loss, and hope. It cycles through generations as it evokes grief and sustains a sense of collective memory. Its persistence in the text shows how traumatic memory is not only about what is forgotten or unspoken but also what holds on—objects, traditions, cultural practices become vessels for both remembrance and trauma. Through Ruqayya's fragmented recollections, silences, and eventual acts of narration, the novel illustrates how trauma resists language yet demands expression. Ruqayya's transformation from a silenced survivor to a self-narrating subject becomes a powerful act of resilience. Her story not only reclaims her personal agency but also speaks on behalf of a collective historical wound, thus offering a site of memory, as theorised by Pierre Nora, where individual pain intersects with national history. Ultimately, Ashour affirms that storytelling is not merely a form of remembrance, but a radical act of survival and political resistance.

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