Wah Academia Journal of Social Sciences
Volume 3, Issue 2, Dec 2024, pp. 930-949
ISSN – E 2958-8731 P 2958-8723

Invisible Wounds: Syrian War Trauma and PTSD in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* by *Zoulfa Katouh*

Ayesha Shabbir[1], Mehwish Fatima[2] ** and Fareeha Hafeez[3]

Abstract

This article explores the severe consequences and lasting impact of Syrian war on its people by analyzing Salama's mental struggles in Zoulfa Katouh's novel As long as the lemon trees grow (2022). Salama's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder PTSD highlights the psychological consequences of adverse war circumstances on war survivors. Death of parents or siblings, constant bombing, lack of medicines, food and shelter are the harsh realities of war which can trigger trauma in human minds. The study reveals that war can disrupt the normal brain development in children and young people resulting in altered cognitive and emotional functioning. The study not only examines war-induced trauma but also discusses the potential of the human mind to adapt in order to help in the process of healing and resilience. Herman's theory of trauma and recovery has been used in the article to provide a deeper understanding of mental and psychological struggles carried by war-affected individuals. This study is relevant to today's social and global concerns and will help the researchers and educators who want to explore and further study on war related trauma and long-term psychological effects of conflicts on young lives.

Keywords: Trauma, PTSD, Syrian war, Resilience, Death, Psychological struggles, Hallucinations, devastation

Introduction

In conflicted and war-ravaged regions, people don't only face physical damage but the devastating effects of war penetrate deep into the souls and minds of people involved. Emotional instability in people living in war-torn areas is a topic less discussed but highly significant to ensure the cessation of basic human rights

[1-2-3] Department of English, University of Faisalabad, Faisalabad – Pakistan

CC BY

violation globally. The novel As long as the lemon trees grow written by Zoulfa Katouh masterfully portrays the psychological and emotional setbacks that people of war and destruction endure. Zoulfa Katouh is a Canadian author who was born in 1994. She is of Syrian descent and she published her first novel As long as the lemon trees grow in 2022. This novel has been translated in 23 different languages and it also won Amy Marthes teen book award. Elly Mahdiyyah Aliyya in her article Salama Kassab's Personality in As long as the Lemon Trees Grow by Zoulfa Katouh published in 2024 shares the importance of this novel in the psychological literary paradigm. This literary work successfully illustrates how human tragedy influences the personality of individuals like Salama. We as humans can learn that personalities can change due to social conflicts experienced and interactions with people around us. (Aliyya, 2024) The novel is set in early Syrian war years when the Revolution was happening in Syria and protests, deaths, bombing, chemical attacks and scarcity of food and medicines were the everyday catastrophes that Syrian people had to face. The protagonist of the novel Salama Kassab is a teen girl who treats patients in a hospital of Homs everyday although she has not completed her degree of Pharmacy yet. She lost her mother when her house came under a bombing attack by the Syrian army. Her brother Hamza and father were taken by Syrian soldiers merely because they attended a protest regarding the Syrian revolution. Salama lives with her best friend and sister-in -law Layla who is pregnant. Pregnant women in Syria don't get adequate safety, food, medication and basic human needs due to which Syrian children suffer from miseries even before they are born. Doctors have to practice delivery operations on women without any anesthesia which causes the death of most mothers and new-born babies. Even Salama, who is herself a doctor, manages to hide only Panadol so that Layla would use it in a severe emergency. Salama's deteriorated mental state unveils when it becomes evident that Layla was only a hallucination that Salama's mind created.

Through the powerful illustration of hallucination Khawf who constantly inculcates fears into Salama's consciousness, Katouh reveals the cognitive dissonance and emotional turmoil that Salama suffers due to war. Salama's PTSD portrayal through the symptoms of anxiety, intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, nightmares and panic attacks explores the misery and mental stress Salama has to go through because she belongs to a homeland drenched in war. After Layla's death, Salama's mind creates Layla's delusion and she becomes more vulnerable to trauma. During her duty as a doctor, Salama experiences traumatic events on a daily basis which further deteriorate her already wretched mental condition. When Salama meets a six-year-

old boy Ahmad in hospital who was very close to death due to internal bleeding caused by bomb attack, she wonders at the calm reaction of boy which is stated in the novel as:

"Am I going to die? He asks, and I see no fear. Do all six-year olds know what death is? Or is it only children of war?' (Katouh, 2022)

Ahmed's death affects Salama emotionally and mentally and she becomes a victim of guilt-ridden anxiety. She always feels guilty towards the life she couldn't save which contributes to her psychological decline. Despite the inner turmoil and despair, Salama survives and exhibits enduring strength which shows the power of resilience that humans hold. The novel through the portrayal of Salama's inner conflicts and her journey towards healing illustrates how catastrophes and challenges during war times can induce trauma in people and how these very hurdles can rewire the functioning of the brain to help humans adapt.

Review of the Literature

Aliyya (2024) carried out research on Salama Kassab's Personality in as long as the Lemon Trees Grow by Zoulfa Katouh l in her undergraduate thesis. Aliyya analyzed the personality structure of Salama in her research using Freud's Psychoanalytic approach. The article explored the relation between Salama's id, ego and superego and concluded that Salama was confused between her Id's urge to escape the war region and her guilt-centered super-ego that wanted her to stay. Kenan's arrival in her life helped Salama to break this tormenting inner conflict because her ego started to develop effectively after Kenan appeared in her life as a symbol of hope. This personality structure of Salama affected her every decision and action in the novel. (Aliyya, 2024)

Latumeten (2024) in the article entitled The Lemon trees And the Syrian Homeland: An Ecocritical Reading of Zoulfa Katouh's As Long as The Lemon Trees Grow executed a study on novel using Ecocritical lens in 2024. Latumeten discusses that war does not only create human sufferings but it also has a devastating impact on environment and nature. Buildings, homes and even hospitals transform into dust as portrayed in Katouh's novel. Use of chemical attacks and bombs disrupts the beauty of the environment in the worst way possible. Latumeten also explores the resemblance between human and nature which is resilience. According to the

researcher, just like nature, including lemon trees shown in the novel, remains resilient during war, characters like Salama and Kenan also show resistance and they fight for their rights showing strong resilience. The study emphasizes that the survival of land is intertwined with the survival of its people. (Latumeten, 2024)

Nopriyanto (2024) engaged in research of Katouh's novel in 2024 to explore the portrayal of trauma in main characters of the novel. The study suggests that trauma has relation with many disciplines including Sociology, History, Anthropology and Psychology but its relationship with literature is quite significant. Nopriyanto uses the theory of trauma given by Cathy Caruth in 1996 to explore the trauma of Salama which becomes a part of her personality after experiencing traumatizing incidents. The two main symptoms of trauma that Salama shows in the novel are hallucinations and panic attacks according to this study. The research emphasizes the role of literature and fiction in spreading awareness and understanding of Trauma and PTSD. (Nopriyanto, 2024)

Magruder (2009) in the article the prevalence of PTSD across war eras and the effect of deployment on PTSD: A systematic review and meta-analysis explores that PTSD has become a signature illness of war eras. The research focused on three global conflicts including Golf war, Iraqi Freedom war and Vietnam War and the conclusion suggested that (PTSD) Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is that specific disease which affects the lives of people living in war-torn regions in a strong ratio although the intensity may vary from person to person and country to country. (Magruder, 2009)

Ahmed (2024) published a research article entitled Prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder and depressive symptoms among civilians residing in armed conflict-affected regions: a systematic review and meta-analysis in 2024. The research states that it is a well-known fact according to studies that people who experience armed conflicts in their lives have high rates of mental and psychological health disorders. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more that 20 percent of the population living in war-affected regions go through mental illness. PTSD and depression are very common in war survivors. (Ahmed et al., 2024)

El-Khoury (2025) with his colleagues conducted research to explore the human rights violations in the current armed conflict of Gaza and Lebanon. They emphasize that according to WHO, mental health is also included in fundamental human

rights but this basic right is not available to people in Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar, and other war-affected regions. The study states that attacks on the psychological well-being of people should be considered a war-crime and must be condemned. "Assessing and addressing the growing prevalence of psychological disorders like post-traumatic stress disorders is imperative, especially for children and youth, who are particularly vulnerable to the psychological impacts of war, displacement, and loss". (Khoury et al., 2025)

Marantika (2024) in her thesis conducted a research entitled "Salama's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Zoulfa Katouh's "As long as the lemon trees grow". Marantika in this research uses PTSD theory to explore symptoms, effects and causes of PTSD in the character of Salama. The four main symptoms that show Salama's PTSD include avoiding reminders of past traumatizing events, being always anxious, having a disturbing mind and being overactive. The causes of Salama's PTSD that have been discussed in Marantika's research are recurring bombing incidents that she witnesses often. The effects of this PTSD that Salama experiences are in the form of sedative, social and mental anxiety. (Marantika, 2024)

There is a significant research gap in exploration of war consequences depicted in Syrian conflict literature. Mostly the focus of research has been on the humanitarian and political aspect of war and the psychological impact on war survivors remains undiscovered. This gap calls for a profound and deeper exploration of war-induced trauma in non-western countries. Zoulfa Katouh's novel As long as lemon trees grow thoroughly portrays the emotional scars of war.

Methodology:

- **Research method**

By employing Qualitative methodology, the study conducts a socio-cultural analysis to closely investigate the psychological struggles of protagonist Salama in Katouh's As long as the lemon trees grow (2022). This approach helps to explore how individual emotional and psychological struggles like Salama's trauma are shaped and influenced by broader social, cultural and historical context of Syrian war. Thematic analysis and close reading of selected passages that shows symptoms of trauma, PTSD and fear caused by war experiences has been conducted. By situating Salama's narrative in broader cultural setting of Syrian war, this research acknowledges the significant role of literature which serves as a medium to critique

CC BY

and portray the socio-cultural conditions that contribute to the production of trauma in people. The research is grounded in Herman's theory of trauma and recovery to deeply interpret Salama's journey from fear to resilience. This inter-disciplinary method offers a profound insight into war-induced trauma experienced by Salama within the socio-political backdrop of Syria.

- **Theoretical framework**

Trauma theory by Judith Herman provides a lens to understand the vulnerability and instability of people living in war-torn areas. Zaleski (2016) states in her article Grounding Judith Herman's Trauma Theory within Interpersonal Neuroscience and Evidence-Based Practice Modalities for Trauma Treatment that Herman's highly acknowledged work Trauma and Recovery (1992) was published decades ago but it's still a pivotal work in the field of traumatology. (Zaleski, 2016) Herman (1992) published his book Trauma and Recovery in 1992 which provided a foundational text to comprehend trauma. He explains that victims and witnesses are highly prone to become traumatized because it becomes for them to remain clear-headed and calm. Traumatized people mostly deny the past horrible events which makes them a PTSD patient. Herman emphasizes the need to reclaim the past in order to heal from PTSD and trauma.

Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level. The study of psychological trauma has an "underground" history. Like traumatized people, we have been cut off from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatized people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history. (Herman, 1992)

Herman explains two types of trauma in his book which are single-event trauma and complex trauma. In single event trauma, one disaster creates trauma in people like rape or natural calamity but in complex trauma, repeated violence and exposure to dangerous situation for a long time period is there like child abuse, war circumstances and domestic violence. Salama's situation aligns with all the concepts given by Herman which makes his work a suitable framework to understand her mental condition. Hermans also explains three main symptoms of PTSD and trauma which are:

CC BY

The many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder fall into three main categories. These are called "hyperarousal," "intrusion," and "constriction." Hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; constriction reflects the numbing response of surrender. (Herman, 1992)

Herman also introduces the three stages recovery model for trauma patients. This triphasic model of healing introduced by Herman emphasizes that establishment of a secure and stable environment is the first key step towards healing. This safe environment can be created if a patient begins to take control of his\her own body and then moves toward a safe living situation, stable relationships and financial security. Social support is quite essential in the development of this secure state. In the case of Salama, she finds this support in the form of Kenan who always shows her the bright side of the world. The second step of healing is the acceptance and remembrance of traumatic events and horrible past from where the problem started. Salama finds solace and comfort according to the novel when she accepts Layla's death instead of living with her hallucination forever. Third step of trauma treatment is re-connection with society and community. Patients should try to make a strong bonding with people around them which can help to shift their roles from victims to an integral part of society.

Because the traumatic syndromes have basic features in common, the recovery process also follows a common pathway. The fundamental stages of recovery are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community. (Herman, 1992)

By employing this framework, the article aims to highlight not only the physical, immediate tribulations and miseries of people in warfare but also stresses their prolonged psychological and emotional ramifications. By employing Herman's theory of trauma and recovery, the study explores the novel's representation of wounds and burdens inflicted upon young people, reiterating the urgent need to address and understand long term aftermaths of war on innocent and harmless people.

- **Data Collection method**

A qualitative approach has been used to study and analyze various incidents in Zoulfa Katouh's novel As long as lemon trees grow portraying the emotional and

CC BY

psychological struggles that Salama endures during war time. A deep content analysis of the characters and dialogues was conducted to investigate every incident and character portraying war-inflicted trauma. The primary source and focus of research are Zoulfa Katouh's novel As long as lemon trees grow and it has been analyzed after reading the novel through close reading technique. Literature review was conducted by reading and analyzing a number of research articles written on the novel's portrayal of trauma and articles related to PTSD in war affected people.

Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Introduction: Situating Trauma in Conflict Literature through Salama's Narrative Zoulfa Katouh has used her first novel As long as lemon trees grow brilliantly to describe the wreckage and devastation that a country suffers when war is imposed on it. The result is not only destroyed buildings, homes and cities but the consequences of such armed conflicts run much deeper. They penetrate into the souls and minds of War survivors in such a way that letting go of this lingering trauma becomes impossible for them. Trauma is a central theme In Zoulfa Katouh's novel As long as the lemon trees grow which has been extensively represented through the character of Salama. She is a young 18-year-old ambitious girl who loses everything including her family, her dreams and her happiness in the destructive war of Syria. Before the cruel and ruthless conflicts started in Syria particularly in her homeland Homs, Salama was a carefree, energetic and lively girl who had high dreams and goals about her bright future.

She mentions that:

"For seventeen years, Homs raised me and cultivated my dreams: Graduate from university with a high GPA, secure a great position at the Zaytouna hospital as their pharmacist, and finally be able to travel outside of Syria and see the world. But only one of those dreams has come true and not in the way I thought it would" (Katouh, 2022).

War transforms Salama from an intelligent and zealous girl to a caretaker of her sister-in-law Layla and patients in hospital. Her life was full of colors and sunshine until her whole family was taken away from her during war. Salama feels great weight of responsibility on her shoulders as a citizen of Homs and Syria. She works in the hospital without breaks with full dedication and focus but the helplessness of

her people makes her heart bleed. In hospitals there are not enough medicines, even availability of Panadol is a luxury and doctors are very few in numbers. Salama tries to ignore the mental exhaustion she feels by keeping herself physically busy with the patients as she herself claims that: "I need the hospital to forget her pain, to keep her hands busy so her mind doesn't scream itself hoarse". It doesn't help much as all she sees in hospital is pain and dejection.

She herself says in the novel:

"In the last six months, I have participated in more surgeries that I can count and closed more eyes than I ever thought I would. This wasn't supposed to be my life" (Katouh, 2022).

- **Roots of Trauma: War, Loss, Responsibility, and Salama's Burden**

One major factor that contributed to Salama's deteriorated mental condition is the death of her mother in a bomb attack by the Syrian army. She saw the mutilated body of her mother smeared in blood lying under the destroyed building without a hijab. This painful moment never left Salama and became a permanent part of her traumatized personality. The hallucination of Khawf who constantly takes her back to that time and heartbreaking memory represents her trauma. Fear, pain, guilt, terror and resentment towards her own self becomes part of Salama's personality. Katouh portrays that Salama lost her normal self the day when she lost her mother in an instant.

"Between the rubble and smoky haze of the bomb, there's past me. Her cheeks are still full, her eyes beginning to come to terms with a pain that will become her constant companion. She's only seventeen, trying to crawl toward Mama's corpse before her muscles give away and she falls to the ground unconscious". (Katouh, 2022)

Salama lost her father and brother Hamza when they were arrested while participating in a protest against the Syrian dictatorship. Her brother was married to Layla and he got a promise from Salama that she will protect Layla and their mother. When her mother died, she felt guilt alongside with pain because she couldn't fulfil her promise. After the incident, she became more afraid for pregnant Layla's safety. Khawf uses this point in the novel to make Salama feel guilty and restless as she is not fulfilling her promise to Hamza by leaving Syria. Salama is

constantly facing the mental strife as she wants to save the lives of Syrian people but staying in Syria risks the life of her only family left: Layla. In the ending chapters of the novel, Katouh reveals the shocking truth that Layla was also a hallucination that Salama's unconscious self-made because her mind was in a state of denial to accept Layla's death. These all war inflicted circumstances including loss of loved ones, responsibility towards country and unfulfilled dreams lead to the psychological tension in Salama.

- **Analysis of Khawf: The personification of Fear and guilt**

When people are compelled to face worst case situations in reality which their normal minds can't process, they become prone to trauma, depression, hopelessness and anxiety as can be seen in the character of Salama who has to live with her fears all the time which is so strong in appearance that Katouh has named it Khawf. This involves concepts of neuroscience which states that people's sufferings do not only affect them physically but also damage their mental health and cognitive functioning. The primary traumatizing event that affected the mental state of Salama was the death of her mother. After that day, she started seeing the hallucination of Khawf which made her life a living hell. She shares with Kenan about her situation asserting that:

"Khawf. He has been in my life since Mama died. I fell pretty hard on my head that day and I don't know, maybe a head injury coupled with my PTSD has affected the relationship between my brain's frontal lobe and sensory cortex". (Katouh, 2022)

Salama didn't only get traumatized from her mother's death but also suffered a head injury at the same moment which disrupted her neurological and psychological system. According to neuroscience, a traumatic experience can affect the amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex of the human brain which are important organs for processing fear and regulating emotions. Being constantly under stress affects the hippocampus of the brain which is responsible for memory formation. In individuals struggling with trauma, memories lose the context of time and place. The terrifying past moments suddenly show up and traumatized people feel that they are happening right now in the present. Khawf constantly shows the painful memories of the past to Salama again and again like the death of her mother in a bombing attack, her last encounter with her brother and the promise he took from her. He declares to Salama that:

"Khawf's voice is as deadly as nightshade. If you're not careful, Salama, you might become the instrument of your destruction.I already changed my mind about leaving, I grumble. So why are you tormenting me? His lips curl into a slow smile. You did. But a lot can happen between now and the boat's departure. I can't have that. You're not in control, Salama. I am. Remember: If you're arrested, then I'm not going anywhere. I'll be showing you all sorts of terrible things". (Katouh, 2022)

Although Salama tries her best to save people's lives, she is not able to save everyone. Every life that she loses during her shift in hospital increases the severity of her trauma. She feels that she is the one responsible for their deaths and guilt penetrates into her soul. She herself says in the novel that: "for every life I can't save during my shift, one more drop of blood becomes a part of me. No matter how many times I wash my hands, our martyr's blood seeps beneath my skin, into my cell. By now, it's probably encoded in my DNA". When she saw a child Ahmed dying due to internal bleeding in front of her eyes, she lost her senses. She shares her trauma and agony towards all pain she witnesses with delusion of her deceased friend Layla saying that: "I couldn't save a little boy. I couldn't. Everyone is dying. Nothing I do works. I feel like I am screaming into an abyss that just swallows everything up. Soon enough it will swallow me too". (Katouh, 2022)

- **Layla's hallucination: A reflection of Salama's Mental Fragmentation**

Besides Khawf, another shocking hallucination that Salama encounters is of Layla. Salama had a strong connection of sisterhood with Layla and after losing her parents and brother Hamza, she was her only family left alive. When Layla was three months pregnant, she was murdered by the Syrian army during a sniper attack. One military sniper's bullet went through her head and the other through her uterus during the October shooting which caused the death of both Layla and her unborn child. Salama witnessed her dead body but the very next morning, Salama started seeing her fake illusion in home. She forgot that Layla ever died. Salama lived with the hallucination of Layla for almost five months. She talked to her daily and never found out until the ending chapters that Layla was not real but a deception created by her own mind. Salama explains that:

"But I forgot all of that...No I changed reality .... I've been living alone since October. For five months, my mind has been spinning a fiction to keep my agony sealed away". (Katouh, 2022)

The hallucination of Layla can be considered more frightening than of Khawf because with Khawf, Salama knew that he was a delusion and projection of her inner fears but Layla was real for Salama. She never considered her an illusion until Kenan exposed reality to her after seeing her talking to herself in an empty house. According to studies, 30 to 40 percent people experience grief hallucination when their loved one dies. This hallucination can be in the form of sensing their presence, hearing their voices or seeing their illusions. The sense of loneliness was so great in Salama that it created a gap in her which her mind unconsciously tried to fill. Oliver Sacks in his book "Hallucinations" (2012) talks about bereavement related hallucinations. According to him, losing family members or loved ones is like losing a part of your own self and this bereavement causes a sudden hole in one's life which must be filled. (Sacks, 2012)

Salama's situation of seeing hallucinations of dead Layla can also be explained through the process of Memory Reconsolidation. This process helps the brain to update or distort the memory during traumatic conditions. This same happened to Salama as her brain deleted the memory of Layla's death and changed it with the memory that Layla survived the sniper attack. Salama constantly has intrusive thoughts which is one of main symptoms shown in PTSD patients. She is always anxious and worrying the worst will happen any moment.

- **PTSD in war survivors: Understanding Salama's Psychological struggles**

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a complex psychological and mental condition in which individuals suffer from nightmares, anxiety and flashbacks but in severe conditions of PTSD like in case of Salama, PTSD may lead to hallucinations. The vivid hallucination of Khawf that haunts Salama portrays the severity of her PTSD and deteriorated mental condition. For seven months, Khawf lived with Salama in the appearance of a real man who spoke and instilled fears into her mind.

She herself observers that:

"He was a hallucination who had come to stay. One who every night for the past seven months has cruelly plucked on my fears, breathing life into them" (Katouh, 2022).

CC BY

In individuals with PTSD, Amygdala which is a small almond shaped part of the brain responsible for processing emotions particularly fear and threat becomes hyperactive. Amygdala controls how people react in certain situations and regulates fight or flight responses in them but its hyperactivity can hijack the control of the brain and can lead to exaggerated fear responses in people. Salama with her PTSD becomes so distant with her own self that her brain can't function properly on how to respond. In many incidents in the novel, when patients come to hospital after a chemical or sniper attack, Salama becomes hyper-reactive, running from one patient to another. Her body and knowledge of medicine works but she suffers from cognitive dissociation.

Trauma also affects hypothalamic pituitary adrenal (HPA) axis which is communication between three brain organs; the hypothalamus, pituitary gland and adrenal glands and is responsible for the body's stress management. Disturbance of the HPA axis can lead to the development of PTSD resulting in heightened anxiety. Salama's interactions with Khawf often revolve around fear of what worst can happen which shows the disturbance of the HPA axis and amygdala in her brain. He explains that:

"Salama, you should know better by now. Unlike you, I don't tire, I don't feel pain and I won't stop until I get what I want. Fighting me, fighting your mind…you won't win. I am infinite and you are not". (Katouh, 2022)

Prefrontal cortex (PFC) is a significant part of the frontal lobe in the brain and is also known as the personality center. It is in charge of higher-level cognitive processes like decision making and problem solving but in PTSD, structure and function of PFC can be altered resulting in amygdala hyperactivity and ultimately Hypervigilance. The vivid hallucination of Khawf represents both the severe PTSD of Salama as well as the catastrophic impacts of war on human psychological and mental health. Khawf asserts that:

"What happiness can you find in this wasteland? There is nothing for you here……At this point Salama, all you can hope for is survival, not happiness". (Katouh, 2022)

- **War-torn Childhood: Salama's encounter with young victims and its impact on her mental state**

CC BY

One of the greatest and most beautiful things that war takes away is the childhood of innocent children living in conflicted regions. The novel richly explores and highlights this aspect of war. During the time Salama spends in hospital, she sees the unlimited amount of misery that even the children of her country cannot avoid. Every day she sees in front of her children, teenagers and youngsters fighting for their lives. In the introductory chapters of the novel, she meets a boy named Ahmad who came to hospital after becoming a victim of bombing. He was only six years old but was more mature than his age. His last words were heartbreaking that he shared with Salama: "Auntie, don't cry! When I go to heaven, I'll tell God everything" (Katouh, 2022).

Kenan's youngest sister Lama was shot by the Syrian army and she went through severe pain due to the incident. Salama operated on her without any medication and anesthesia because they were not available in the hospital. Salama states her exhaustion saying that:

"'Bite on the belt, I tell her. This isn't what I ever envisioned myself doing. I was supposed to be a Pharmacist. I wasn't supposed to cut into children's stomachs in their homes'. (Katouh, 2022)

The Syrian city Dara's incident shown in the novel also explores the challenges faced by people living in war-affected regions. Government attacked and kidnapped fourteen boys who were only in their early teens merely because they'd scribbled "It's your turn, Doctor" on the wall. After kidnapping, they were brutally tortured, their fingernails were ripped off and then they were sent back to their families in miserable condition. The discussion of the Hama massacre between Kenan and Salama reveals the deep intergenerational trauma that passes from parents to their children. Mother of Kenan was a survivor of that incident but she watched her nine-year-old brother being shot in the head. This traumatizing event didn't only remain with her throughout life but she also transferred it into her son, Kenan. Both Kenan and Salama claim that they lost their family to war before they were even born. Even before the revolution started, dictatorship ruled Syria and there was not a single Syrian family who evaded the dictatorship's cruelty. He shares with Salama that:
"My mom is Hamwi. When the military stormed her city, she survived. She was seven years old and she watched her nine-year-old brother get shot in the head. I've lost family even before I was born, Salama. Injustice is all I've ever known" (Katouh, 2022).

CC BY

In one part of the novel, a child was burned down in a bombing attack which left Kenan breathless. In Syria, war made every basic human facility unavailable for Syrian people. Medicines were in shortage, water was not available in adequate amount, food became a luxury that not everyone could afford and death became a regular visitor to Syrian's homes. No one was certain when their loved ones could die due to sudden attack. While the world was busy enjoying, children of Syria were dying due to starvation, poor medical services and bombing attacks. As Kenan says: "No one deserves this. Here babies are starving while in cities like Damascus people are throwing away their leftover lunch because they are full" (Katouh, 2022). Most victims in sniper attacks are children as noticed by Salama. She claims that:

"I know they are victims of sniper attack when I see no dismembered limbs but blood fountaining out. And they are all children" (Katouh, 2022).

Even when people escape the war-torn region, the world does not take them wholeheartedly. The novel exhibits the obstacles that refugees face when they go to Europe or Germany. Kenan shares with Salama that refugees who are going to Europe are getting robbed and tricked, left alone in the middle of nowhere. Girls are being trafficked or married off and boys are forced into child labor (Katouh, 2022). The portrayal of the incident of Karem-el-Zeitoun causing a huge massacre of women and children reveals the inhuman nature of war which does not forgive innocent lives. Dr. Zaid shares with Salama the horrifying details of the incident in these words; 'Women and children with slit throats. None of them left alive. Not a single gunshot. The children. They were hit with blunt objects and one girl was severely mutilated'. When people who were exposed to chemical attack came to hospital and died within minutes helplessly, Salama was utterly shocked. She mentions that:

"Teenagers with their heads stretched back, arms and legs shaking uncontrollably. Little children with foam at their mouths, looking up, trying to make sense of what's happening to them" (Katouh, 2022).

Salama's constant encounter with traumatizing events and dead bodies of innocent children in hospital created emotional exhaustion in her and she started to feel detached and numb often. She also begins to feel guilty toward every life she couldn't save during her shift. Studies suggest that prolonged exposure to life-threatening stress hyperactivates the HPA axis resulting in dysfunction of the

hippocampus. Constant encounters with misery and deaths of innocent people didn't give Salama's brain a chance to reset itself which was already dealing with PTSD and hallucination, making her mental condition worse.

- **Resilience as Resistance: Rewiring Salama's Brain through Love and Purpose**

Alongside representing the negative psychological consequences of war, the novel also illustrates the adaptive and positive side of neuroplasticity which helps the brain to form new neural connections so that people can heal and rebuild their lives. In the beginning chapters of the novel, Salama shares the courage of a boy no older than ten years whose face is as white as a sheet due to a large slice of metal in his arm but he doesn't let out a single scream because he doesn't want to scare his little sister sitting beside him. The character of Layla in the novel, who is actually a delusion created by Salama's unconscious mind, is also the embodiment of resilience and hope. She lost her beloved husband, family and home in war but even in these darkest of times, optimism and hope of light didn't leave her. Her conversations with Salama always radiate a comforting and soothing energy. The illusion of Khawf represents the frightened and traumatized part of Salama while the hallucination of Layla shows the positive and optimistic self of Salama. Layla is actually the hopeful version of Salama who always gives her strength and vision to go on. Lays points out that:

"It does not hurt for you to think about your future. We don't have to stop living because we might die. Anyone might die at any given moment, anywhere in the world. We are not an exception. We just see death more regularly than they do". (Katouh, 2022)

Both main characters of the novel Salama and Kenan face every disaster that comes in their way with grace and bravery. They watched their family die in front of their eyes but they stood firm to protect their remaining family left alive. Kenan is the person who helps Salama to look at the good things even in war times. According to Salama he might be the only person left in the city who still dreams. He loves his country and performs his duty by broadcasting the brutalities his fellow citizens are facing through YouTube videos. He says to Salama that with all the miseries and destruction going down there, we often forget to appreciate all the great beautiful things that are up there in the sky like sunsets or blue sky after rain. He assures Salama that she deserves to be happy. He illustrates that:

"No matter what happens, you remember that this world is more than the agony it contains. We can have happiness, Salama. Maybe it does not come in a cookie cutter format, but we will take the fragments and we will rebuild it". (Katouh, 2022)

Kenan's love becomes the strength of Salama in the novel. Despite the threats of Khawf, Salama keeps Kenan by her side and they even get married in their homeland Syria. Before leaving Syria, Salama decides to participate in the revolutionary protest for the first-time which triggers change and renewal. She describes the atmosphere of protest as fearless because according to Salama, fear dies in very place of Syria. "Fear dies here!" she claims. (Katouh, 2022) Lemon tree itself is a symbol of resilience and bravery in Syrian history as before dying, mother of Salama shared with her that; "although government stripped away our freedom, had taken everything from us and committed genocide in Hama but we held our heads high and planted lemon trees in act of defiance". Salama hears this old poem of Syria in protest: "Every lemon will bring forth a child and the lemons will never die out" (Katouh, 2022).

Whenever Khawf threatens Salama and shows the painful memories and worst future scenarios, she always starts calling out flower names including Jasmine, bloodroot, Daisies and Lilacs. This show's Salama's resilience and fighting behavior against her dark and pessimistic self. In the end of the novel when Khawf appears for the last time in front of Salama, he says that I have been in people's hearts from the very beginning of this world in the form of fear. Salama also expresses to Khawf that these hallucinations were a kind of defense mechanism, her mind prepared so that she could survive. Shay says that:

"Without Khawf, I would be buried somewhere in Homs where no one would remember me. Without Layla's appearing to me, I wouldn't have found the courage to live for Syria. To fight for my country". (Katouh, 2022)

Salama's acceptance of her hallucinations and admitting that they helped her to survive shows that she succeeded in defeating them. Although Kenan and Salama with little Lama, Yusuf manages to get on a boat but their suffering doesn't end there as they had to swim the Mediterranean Sea for hours due to adverse weather conditions. The end of the novel is vague and ambiguous. It's not clear whether they managed to survive or not. The novel ends with an obscure question by Salama: "Am I dead?" but Salama's seeing the torch light indicates she may be alive. Zoulfa Katouh remarkably demonstrates the hazardous consequences of war on people's mental,

emotional and psychological health through the deep exploration of Salama's character and her struggles to survive while battling with her mental conflicts, PTSD and hallucinations.

Conclusion

Zoulfa Katouh in her debut novel "As long as the lemon trees grow" profoundly explores the psychological and mental repercussions of war particularly through the character of Salama whose transformation from a normal lively 18 years old girl to a traumatized person who is always surrounded by hallucinations and intrusive thoughts highlights the lasting impact of war on human's mental state. The novel not only presents the strong imagery of physical wreckage and devastation (destroyed buildings, dead bodies, ruined homes) caused by war but it also portrays the internal deep scars that survivors like Salama and Kenan carry. Incidents in the novel showing stolen childhood from children living in war-torn region Syria and the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder PTSD of Salama reflects the intensity of annihilation that war can exert. After the close reading of the novel's sections representing Salama's trauma and connecting her mental condition with Herman's trauma theory in the analysis of the research, the study reveals that there is a strong and undeniable relation between Salama's PTSD and war inflicted traumatizing events Salama suffered during Syrian war including her mother's death.

The mental sufferings of Salama including PTSD, hallucinations, Khawf and persistent fear of the unknown not only illustrate the story of one person but Katouh has used the character of Salama to convey the unseen struggles of every individual who has been the victim of inhumane war circumstances. War revolves around the interest of a few powerful elites but it carries with it the innocent lives and dreams of millions of innocent people. Children lose their very basic right to act like children and young people like Salama and Kenan become obliged to live a life they never dreamed to live just like Salama says in the novel: "This wasn't supposed to be my life". Those who die during war become a painful memory, a stain to humanity itself and those who survive like Salama and Yusuf never heal. They always carry with themselves the trauma of losing their family, their dreams, their warm homeland and ultimately their own selves.

The novel under focus of this research can be further explored in future by using child psychology and development studies to understand how war disturbs the

CC BY

normal cognitive development in children. This article emphasizes that there is an urgent need to acknowledge the devastating effects of war on harmless people. The basic human rights of safety, food, peace and medical facilities should be available to everyone in the world without exception. To stop this inhumane and cruel cycle of war, it is essential that the international communities hold aggressive regimes accountable for human rights violations. Global efforts and solidarity are needed to ensure the revival of humanity in this chaotic world where people are being deprived of their fundamental human rights like every character present in Katouh's novel.

CC BY

References

Ahmed, S. H., Zakai, A., Zahid, M., Jawad, M. Y., Fu, R., & Chaiton, M. (2024). Prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder and depressive symptoms among civilians residing in armed conflict-affected regions: a systematic review and meta-analysis. General Psychiatry, 37(3), e101438.

Aliyya, E. M. (2024). Salama Kassab's Personality in as long as the Lemon Trees Grow by Zoulfa Katouh (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim).

El-Khoury, J., Merchant, H., McMahon, A., Torales, J., Atoui, M., Ventriglio, A., ... & Bhugra, D. (2025). Mental health is still a human right during times of war. International Journal of Social Psychiatry, 00207640251331856.

Herman, J. L. (1992). Trauma and recovery. Basic Books/Hachette Book Group.

Katouh, Z. (2022). As long as the lemon trees grow. First edition. Little, Brown and Company.

Latumeten, A. A. T. (2024). The Lemon Trees and The Syrian Homeland: An Ecocritical Reading of Zoulfa Katouh's As Long as The Lemon Trees Grow. Prologue: Journal on Language and Literature, 10(2), 355-370.

Marantika, G. J. (2024). Salama's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Zoulfa Katouh's As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya).

Magruder, K. M., & Yeager, D. E. (2009). The prevalence of PTSD across war eras and the effect of deployment on PTSD: A systematic review and meta- analysis. Psychiatric Annals, 39(8), 778-788.

Nopriyanto, R. The Portrayal of the Main Character's Trauma in As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow (2022). Passage, 12(2), 116-123.

Zaleski, K. L., Johnson, D. K., & Klein, J. T. (2016). Grounding Judith Herman's Trauma Theory within Interpersonal Neuroscience and Evidence-Based Practice Modalities for Trauma Treatment. Smith College Studies in Social Work, 86(4), 377–393. https://doi.org/10.1080/00377317.2016.1222110