

# Inception

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## War Trauma and Depression in Abawi's *A Land of Permanent GoodByes: A Psychoanalytic Study*

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### Abstract

The civil war has distorted the peace of the Syrians and compelled them to flee from the country for survival. As refugees, they have to encounter considerable traumatic occurrences, including xenophobia, the hunger crisis, casualties, exploitation, and violence. To analyze the repercussions of these crises, this study recounts the effects of war trauma and depression on the psyche of the Syrian refugees and their battles to cope with them. As an Afghan-born American author and journalist, Atia Abawi has witnessed the atrocities of war as her native country was ravaged by the Soviet Union. Being a refugee herself, she has a strong affinity for refugees globally. *A Land of Permanent GoodByes* presents the cataclysmic traumatized encounters of Syrians and the geopolitics that have played a decisive role in transforming Syria into a Civil War. Thus, by integrating the notions of Caruth's theory of trauma and Herman's theory of coping mechanisms, the study demonstrates how the coping mechanism enables the trauma survivors to re-establish a connection with life by embracing their circumstances and giving voice to the wounds that frequently scream out. Furthermore, it enables the refugees to fight back and encounter the afflictions in constructive ways.

### Keywords:

Civil War, Trauma, Syrian Refugees, Depression, Xenophobia, Exploitation.

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War Trauma has become the most prominent dilemma of this contemporary milieu. In Literature, it unfolds the harrowing narratives of migrants and foregrounds that remains unfamiliar in language and behavior. War fiction authors delineate the inescapable migrations' of individuals from their native countries and the savagery of war through the portrayal of different characters. To illuminate this approach, Abawi hinges on the various

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strains of war trauma, repression of Syrians and their battles to subsist in warfare circumstances. She does not only depict the internal conflicts that have mutated the territory into sectarian polarization but also highlights the geopolitics that has impacted millions of Syrians' lives. In 2011, the radical mobilization and Arab feuds ravaged Syria's harmony. President Assad's regime and its opponent retaliated to the passive uprisings against the reign with an iron fist that whirled the region into a bloodbath. Abawi personates the excruciating impediments of Syrians that they stumble across in consequence of the Syrian Civil war. Elaborating the trauma of refugees, she stands for every refugee who is striving for survival and asserts that people exhibit hostility and xenophobia towards refugees during their excruciating journey

Many other writers, such as Khalid Hussein, Mohsin Hamid, Nadeem Aslam, Christy Lefteri, Toni Morrison, and Monica Ali have given voice to the traumatic tribulations of refugees. As Hamid opines that refugees with fragmented selves come across assorted devastating sights and have vouched assassinations, assaults and rapes as well (Hamid, 2018). Additionally, as a refugee, "you have to lose not just your home or family, but also your identity" (Johnson, 2020, p. 13). Other than identity crisis, Abawi's portrayals exhibit the initial stages of unavoidable diseases that cause the "disruptions to biological, psychological, and socio-cultural development, through stress appraisals" (Ajrouch et al., 2020, p. 3). Refugees have a strong correlation with trauma. They are the dislodged people who endeavor for refuge driven from their home by war of terror and assaults. Their responses to adversaries' such as humiliation, bigotry, upheaval, and chaos, change the connotation of trauma, and such trauma connotations are similar to rubbing away the identity of the individuals. Before Freud, trauma was considered as a wound inflicted on the body. It was Sigmund Freud who further elucidates it as a psychological wound rather than a physical one. Caruth shoulders his perspective by stating that it's an unpleasant incident that is usually ahead of any human experience. It strives to address the story of an event that is frequently ignored and delayed (Caruth, 1996). Trauma formulates the identity of an individual as it contains the collective memory of that specific happening. It's comparable to losing one's identity and purpose, "a tear in the social fabric" (Eyerman, 2001, p. 2). Whereas Ganzevoort jots down that the impact of the trauma on the individual is what determines trauma rather than the incident itself. It jeopardizes his individuality, "disrupts the life...and thus undermines identity" (Ganzevoort, 2008, p.22).

In juxtaposition, Trauma is enumerated variedly in different contexts. The unspeakable nature of trauma seizes the victim's capability to give voice to the upsetting

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ordeals that he went through and the trauma wounds often cry out because it cannot be left behind but must be ingeminate endlessly. Accordingly, certain adverse memories from the past, such as the remnants of insults and denigration continue to bleed long after “the excruciating physical injuries have crusted over” (Margalit, 2004, p. 120). Traumatic behaviors two modes have been further expounds by Dominick LacCpara. Both “Acting Out” and “Working Through” are associated with Freud's theories of melancholy and mourning. He asserts that these behaviors enable the victims to distinguish between past and present and embrace the scars by believing that “yes, it was distressing but I’m existing here now, and this is different from back then” (LacCpara, 2014, p. 144).

Caruth contends that the victim's prolonged, unrestricted recurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena is what triggers trauma. Due to numbness, the sufferer is incapable to retort at that moment but later his numbness turned into continual nightmares. The traumatic wounds cannot be perceived to the hilt as it is often experienced out of the blue. Inevitably, the traumatized individual has to undergo from double wound as it hurls oneself into the splitting up of ‘departure’, ‘burning’, ‘falling’, and persist in enduring and beholding past obliterated wounds. She further adds that trauma’s story is inexorably bound to a referential revisit and it whirls around a narrative that struggles to provide “an account of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). She foregrounds that fragmentation and dissociation are erratically correlated. The depiction of any person’s fragmented consciousness give substance to her claim that through a person’s past, trauma is not identifiable, but on the contrary, it has an unassimilated nature; the survivor is later haunted by the fact that it was precisely unknown in the first place.

Moreover, Caruth formulates collocation between accident neurosis and warfare. She explicates that both neurosis ends up with unruly occurring of inhuman incidents, nightmares, hallucinations and flashbacks. Like Freud, she too believes that both states of memories from the war or to the nightmare of an accident and dreams stirring in traumatic neurosis encompass distinctiveness of repetitively driving the victim reverse back to his mishap state. The emotional responses consistently fuel dissociation and it is tied up to another individual’s trauma through the possibility of listening of other victim’s wounds. It has such a lasting impact on the survivor that traumatic war neurosis is generated by the overwhelming mechanical traumas as it has the ability to bring forth the past incident into memory. Catastrophic repercussion generates a breach in the protective barrier of human psyche. Likewise, disassociation and latency of trauma fabricate a temporal gap and that

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proceed the victim to in an impediment state of knowledge of excruciating dreams that persist unknown and hover in the unconscious but subsequently it revives to the conscious and in that case he ascertain himself as disconnected or exiled from his history or identity.

Herman posits that distressing migrations have an adverse impact on the psyche that distorts the daily modifications of life. Overwhelming forces render the victim defenseless, and when those forces are natural, we refer to them as disasters. And we talk about atrocities when the forces are those of other people. For such kind of trauma, Herman has divided three stages of coping mechanism. Trauma grasps the sense of safety from the survivor and the first stage sets forth that only with the social reinforcement of family and friends can a safe environment be created, and once it develops, the person can progressively move forward into a broader sphere of connection to the world. Herman sets forth the concept that the survivor should be able to recall and grieve the painful memories he encountered in the past at the second stage of healing. At this point, he feels like a foreign immigrant fighting for his life. In the long run, the survivor opts to voice his wounds that often bleed by alleviating anxiety, guilt and depression. Furthermore, It assists him in reframing the unpleasant recollection to ensure that it could be "integrated into the survivor's life story" (Herman, 1992, p. 175). She further pinpoints the third phase that empowers the survivors' life with positivity and urges him to reconnect with life. While encountering evils, he finally learns how to adhere to what is good for his mental state and embrace life with gratitude. Therefore, these stages of coping mechanism instigate the trauma survivor to return to normal life contentedly.

Considering the trauma of refugees, Abawi's *A Land of permanent GoodByes* draws attention to the Syrian Civil War, and provides the delineation of the prevalent refugee dilemma. The novel pivots on the misery endured by Tareq, the protagonist, a teenager whose life ravaged by the military airstrikes that have taken most of the lives of his family members. He could not track down his younger brother Salim's body, so he is presumed as dead. As Caruth denotes that trauma's victim response towards such devastating incidents is often delayed and appears in repeated hallucinations. Due to numbness, he cannot able to react at the moment but is later relieved through nightmares and flashbacks. Such psychological collision of trauma can be traced back to Tareq's state when he finds out about the barrel bombs in his home. He felt a sudden chilling chest pain and could not proficient to remain in his senses while witnessing the grisly deaths of his twin brothers, mother, and grandma. His physiological misery was "numbed by the enormous emptiness in his soul" (Abawi, 2018, p. 14).

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Such distressing circumstances urged his father, Fayad to escape from Syria with surviving children Tareq and Susan. Although Abawi does not belong to Syria but being a refugee herself, she perceives an alliance with the refugees and their agony compelled her to shed light on their intricate battles. Abawi enumerates the terrible fate of Syrians through the narrator-Destiny in the introductory scene of the text that they are born to die. She contends that war has ripped the Syrian community apart and now they are delving into the Darwinian conflict of survival. Violence has reached to an extent that they observe it after reaching to Raqqa. A city once called the treasure of the territory now turned into ashes. The Holy Wars between different sects have plunged it with an odor that is the recipe of bereavement, devastation, and depression. Syria is no more pertained to its people anymore as Musa sums up this state as “you have got Russia, Assad, and even America in the air, and Daesh, the free Syrian Army and militias on the ground” (Abawi, 2018, p. 35). Homes are deserted, shops are obstructed and not a single woman’s glimpse can be discerned in the market. In Syria, women do not feel safety. Tareq recounts the dreadful account of a student who was abducted, brutally assaulted and subsequently murdered by the Shabiha terrorist group. Later afterwards, one of the men allegedly blatantly stated that he got the power and seized it since he could.

In addition, they are not permitted to verbalize against the regime. A young boy was beheaded in front of his parents for becoming a part of the discussion in opposition to the caliphate. This dreadful remembrance haunts Musa to the core that he unearths his predicament, “they replay in my dreams at night. Like a Daesh screen in my mind” (Abawi, 2018, p. 43). These reminisce from precedent and nightmares mould the life of a person and impede his potential to move forward. When the eyes witness atrocities, the body deteriorates and there is oftentimes numbness; followed by improbability and vulnerability. Eventually, Musa and Tareq make his way to Turkey but their misery does not end here. Abawi indicates that refugees are perilous boats like eggshells, isolated and abandoned. Like a newborn toddler, they need empathy, affection, and understanding. But all they obtain is abhorrence, animosity, and ruthlessness that filled them with darkness and depression. Syrians have no identity other than refugees. They unearth themselves in an unimaginable chain of episodic trauma that leads them to depression and alienation. In Turkey, even dogs are living a better life than Syrians. There are millions of refugees residing in Turkey from all over the world and due to competition of cheap labors, they are often defrauded and detained. Abawi also devotes her concerns about identity division of humans as nations, tribes, cultures and the most important as families to distinguish but

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in refugee state, the future generations will no longer be acquainted with their ancestors as they have no other identity other than refugee. Therefore what they are holding as sacred maybe fell between the cracks by generations, and it's plausible that their descendants will detest something they cherished.

Abawi's narrator chalks out that the sufferer is haunted by the unforeseen and terrible phenomenon of that tragedy rather than the disorienting event itself. The belatedness of trauma renders him numb and seizes the ability to retort at that moment. Characters' escape to Europe is not always worthwhile, they have to sacrifice their loved ones, and for Syrians; it's the water that personates the reprobate's part. But for their survival, they still have to opt it. After losing his little sister-Susan, Tareq's predicament pushed him to hallucinations and he dismays that maybe his sister is found in the same vein as Alan Kurdi, a three years old child who was submerged by the water during his escape to Europe. His picture circulated on social media and everybody joined hands to help the refugees so that no family has to go through the similar circumstances but within a few days, all and sundry disregard about it as it never happened. Abawi expounds such trauma narrative strains in Tareq and interprets that he imagined terrifying scenarios in his mind, all of which ended with his sister murdered on the beach. Even if you survive from water and make your way to Greece still those who left behind during this long battled journey, make you feel dissociative from everything. Among them was a woman who passed away after discovering that her child was no longer breathing. Abawi highlights the psychological consequences of such sufferings, "if you ever questioned if one can die from a broken heart, the answer is yes" (Abawi, 2018, p. 167).

Dissociation or fragmentation is allied with trauma of the consciousness and its sufferer perceives detachment from everything. Many characters have grappled such kind of dissociation. When a person relentlessly withstand agitating incidents, deaths, and callousness then there comes a time when he is impassive and does not exhibit any physical response towards heart-clenching happenings. Destiny sketches out this dilemma of dissociation as many of characters presume that some of them cried, while others had run out of tears; death had followed them from Syria. Tareq's trauma fragmentation is visible following the abduction of his sister by smugglers in his shattered mental state. Since losing a loved one is comparable to death, he feels there is nothing left that is valuable.

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Abawi's novel resonates with that of Christy Lefteri's famed novel, *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*. Like Tareq, the protagonist, Nuri's loved one was also engulfed by the war and he has to encounter comparable obstacles such as displacement, loss and other war atrocities. The memories of his dead child have snatched his potential to move on. His enactment of trauma loss is initiated in every child's voice that nudges him about his son. The more he plugs away his memory, the more it makes room visible, and nothing works to block out the traumatized memories (Lefteri, 2019). It is the inescapable desolation that does not let the victim forget about the precedent wounds, the double wounds that bleed. Tareq's double wound can be gauged after finding out that his mother is dead even after giving the last farewell kiss to her phlegmatic hands still his mind could not accede that she is no more. No child has the heart to witness this trauma, even after seeing Musa's mother, He felt bad for having thoughts regarding why his mother was deceased but Musa yet had. Trauma's unintegrated nature and referential revisit are parallel to time. You never feel as whole after losing someone close to your heart. Although time alleviates the agony but the moment anamnesis hits, it "pricks at your heart with the same stabs and pangs" (Abawi, 2018, p. 54). Abawi has strived to shed light the throes of war-torn territories through assorted characters and one of them is from Afghanistan too. Through Jamila's character, Abawi has disclosed the brutal impact of 40 years of war as she undergoes a horrendous sight of the killing of her family. The dreadful imagery afterward emerges in her conscious frequently and she fall the prey of traumatic neurosis. While she was sharing the reason behind her escape and the assassination of parents, she begins to deem that the narration is putting her back to that incident. The disquieting nostalgia explodes her in tears and it evolves into an obstruction that does not edge her forward to the new crossing as refugee. Kamel asserts that the local fishermen have to alight upon such sort of ordeals too. Instead of fishes, the Sea is abounding with corpses of migrants and this appalling descriptions recurs in their dreams "until their dying breath" (Abawi, 2018, p. 74). The crises characters have to come across leave a trail of survival guilt and fears. It has such a lasting impact on the memory that they could not have the audacity to articulate their double wounds and are always in compunction of their exit from homeland. To add to it, Tareq's father, Fayad's conscious always battling with these regrets after the loss of his family members in the airstrike. The ghosts of their wife and children impede his breathing, and he regrets prolonging the departure. The narrator unveils that no refugee desires to depart from his country because he discerns that his longer stay can be a bigger gamble as An American aircraft might launch a missile against Daesh, murdering all those in the vicinity of it. Their departure does not halt the outrageous miseries but it's actually

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the beginning and in exhaustible defy for endurance and exile often questions their existence.

Abawi propounds that their journey is an unvarying memento that it's a permanent adieu to their native soil. As a refugee, they do not only have to shove off from your relations but along with they have to cope with the trauma of exile too. Jamila's character is sated with such emotions of fears, guilt, and survival regrets for not able to rescue her sister from smugglers. She is battling with a war of mind and her sister's memories hang around in her for not rescuing her and she questions what she might have done differently to save Najiba. Smugglers are the ones who add fuel to the war trauma of refugee crises as Kamel unfolds that they are used in human trafficking and it's quite unproblematic for them to advertise it on Facebook. Muzhgan, an Afghan refugee was the victim of assault by the smuggler. Throughout her journey of escape, she has no one to share her mental state and the refugee camp does not provide the emotional support to her. The appalling traumatic memories of her rape keep lingering in her mind and even after moving to Europe, she has to cope with trauma solely.

Abawi's narrator illustrates that the extremity, the female refugees have to withstand is more disastrous as compare to men. During the crossing, other than refugee tribulations, they have to deal men too who demoralized their vulnerability, poverty and exquisiteness. Tariq for the very first time perceives a sort of relief that his mother is no more with him; otherwise, she has to bear out such sadistic treatment of men. After closely examining the trafficker, he even got more anxious about his sister and he expounds their gaze as, "the men's eyes were soulless and could turn a body into the ice with just a glare" (Abawi, 2018, p. 52). The poignant response varies from person to person towards distressing happenings. The upsetting remembrances never fade from the victim's mind and it propels him towards depression and terror. When a person in his childhood, witnesses any sort of physical violence, it has a detrimental impact on his pneumatic that further precedes him to psychological debility. Abawi has strived to accentuate this phase through the personality of Susan. Susan's sketches his family on paper that ripped Tareq's heart apart by seeing some faces on red whereas others on blue. Her painting description sheds light on the viciousness of war on the consciousness of a little girl and how losing your loved ones proceeds to psychological trauma at this young age.

In the first stage of coping mechanism, the protagonist seems emotionally unstable and powerless. The nerve-racking incidents relentlessly persecute him and he cannot unearth a safe environment. Salim has to undergo many painful experiences including his

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kidnapping by the radical groups who propelled him to do all the illegal things that coerce the Syrians to flee from their territory. His father summed up his state, “he did not sleep well, and when he did, he screamed in the night” (Abawi, 2018, p. 176). Among all the characters, Tareq too feel scared and not able to find the capability to feel safe. It’s the family who gives you warmth and hope to survive through this irksome journey. Such strength and warmth can be viewed in Jamila and Najiba’s characters as their “eyes steadied on each other's as they reduced” (p. 99). Even though the icy water causes Tareq's body to tremble while underwater, the memories of his present family members serve as a healer despite the freezing temperatures. He keeps shouting “for Susan; for my father and for Jamila” (Abawi, 2018, p. 111). After settling to new environment, he encounters the comparable confrontation interrelated to his precedent and it’s the phase, where he fragments the emaciated layer of safety and thus he moves along to the second stage. When he senses the safety in the long run, he exclaims about his disturbing scars and recollects the story and share with others. Sharing is a kind of healing and words works like a therapy. Khalil, one of the Syrian refugees confers his trauma story as a permanent refugee of war affected and claims that sufferings impinge on you badly but the helplessness of losing your mother in your hands hits the trauma bolt differently. The worst part of surviving is witnessing your mother's skin flake and lips shrivel till the point at which she is no longer able to breathe. Mourning and recalling steers to therapeutic and decisively, it emerges from all emotions of dread, remorse, ignominy and slur.

In the final stage of recovery, Tareq shields his wellbeing and pays heed to the surroundings and relationships with others. Additionally, he communicates with people and bygone does not devastate him any longer. So, the third stage recuperates him from past traumas and he ascertains to worth the things that he still have as he remarks that even though the journey was terrifying, it was truly incredible to be surviving. He finds the ecstasy of falling in love with Jamila and her reminiscence helps him to numb the heart from throbbing and it works like the “drug that has been named the feeling of a trance like bliss” (Abawi, 2018, p. 176). Tareq is now more fretful about present and his love for Jamila becomes the source of strength and faith to carry on against every odds.

Thus, the research establishes that through numerous characters, the novel endeavors to draw attention to the trauma Syrian refugees and the way they are coping with their sufferings for survival. The Syrian Civil War has not only ruptured the lives of Syrians by isolating them from their loved ones but also viciously distorts their identities from legal to illegal. Moreover, Abawi’s narrative serves as a testimony by depicting

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trauma's durable impact on refugees. By advocating the fallouts of bloodshed, she surmises that the war shadow cannot be detained to a single territory. Today Syria is in its ground zero, like a mushroom cloud but the war upshot will be prevalent. Similar to a nuclear explosion, "the debris and emissions have extensive, long-lasting, and catastrophic effects" (p. 42). She hinges on the unending migration core issues and argues that refugees lost their lives to make it to Europe for a better life and several facets instigate the refugees to encounter the sufferings positively and loved ones' memories become their power for survival. Abawi brings to the fore that like characters in the novel, millions of refugees are battling for refuge, and instead of xenophobia or hatred, the world needs to depict empathy and compassion towards them.

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