

**The Impact of Traumatic Experiences on Identity formation in Radwa  
Ashour's *The Woman From Tantoura***

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the concept of identity formation in Radwa Ashour's novel *The Woman From Tantoura*. Ashour in this novel present the notion traumatic experiences and sharing memories as elements of identity formation for Palastenian people. Ashour uses multiple narratives to coexist, since multiplicity enriches the experience of Palestinian's collectivity identity. The Palestinian people use their suffering and sharing memories as act of survival. In this paper I have discussed Ashour's novel *The Woman From Tantoura* within the concept of traumatic experiences and cultural memory. I have used Aleida Assaman's notion of transnational memories and Astrid Erll's notion of traveling memories to discuss how both of traumatic experiences and cultural memory can be viewed as positive forces to affirm the national identity.

**Keywords-** National identity, Sharing Memories, Traumatic experiences, Collective Memories , Trauma as an Identity Maker,

**Introduction**

Radwa Ashour is a recognizable Egyptian author. Radwa Ashour was born in El- Manual, a district in Cario In her writings, Ashour does not follow the classical historical approach to history. Her historical novels try to move forward with the help of the past, where the characters reaffirm themselves through cultural, and historical heritage. In her novel, Ashour reconsiders the philosophy of history. She clarifies that, literature and literary criticism work as an act of resistance in the face of oppression and domination, where the collective identity built around cultural and historical

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heritage. The novel shed the light on oppression and resistances. Ashour adopts a futuristic approach in her narrative techniques, where the resistance of the past is brought to the present. Ashour's novel different from other historical novels, which provide a reductions view of history as a topic of ethics and moral values or as a subject of mourning, grieving and stop celebrating past glories. In her writings, Ashour adopts victims' viewpoint and their effective actions in a matter of clarifying that, history is not written by the victors only. The fallen too can write it form of their perspective

### ***The Women from Tantoura Critical Review***

Radwa Ashour's *The Woman from Tantoura* (2014) is her last novel, in which she documents the story of the Palestinian Nakba through the eyes of Ruqayya. The Palestinian girl from Tantoura village, located in the south of Haifa. Tantoura became famous as it is the place where the massacre was committed by the Israeli forces in 1948. The novel depicts the Palestinian's catastrophe through the character of Ruqayya and the her family members. People are killed, shattered, and forced to leave their country, ending up as refugees in Lebanon. Ruqayya's life is completely changed after the father and two of her brothers' execution, along with the forced displacement of her family. Ruqayya and her mother moved to Lebanon, where her uncle and his family decided to be there temporarily till the end of the war, but later they settled there forever. The story describes Ruqayya's life as she gets married, have children and grandchildren, but she lives in endless waiting. Being in Lebanon, Ruqayya witnesses a horrific issues, likes the Lebanese civil war, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the campus, her mother's death followed by her uncle, and her mother's in law along with the disappearance of her husband and the kidnapping of her son. Apart from that, Ruqayya cannot survive the memories of the exile. In this novel, Ashour exposes the various aspects of the Palestinian diaspora through the character of Ruqayya and her family. Ashour describes the different paths Palestinians take or forced to follow after the events, and how they are affected by the long nature of the struggle. Ashour sheds the light on Palestinian's refugees camps, and their important roles in fuelling the Palestinian resistance and maintaining the national identity. How the long process of internalizing memories and keeping the skill of recollection as an act of survival. Ruqayya tries her best to forget the memories of the massacre and her family members' death. Her memories lead her and other people to use their Palestinian identity as a source of self-empower.

This part will clarifies how Ashour uses the Palestinian catastrophe to function as a continuous value, and forgetting is impossible in a situation where sufferings still exists after the catastrophe. She uses implementation of suffering as a unifying force and unity to break the bond with the traumatic past, and to preserve the Palestinian collective memory and identity.

### **The Palestinian Catastrophe as a Site of Memory and a Component of Palestinian Identity**

Palestinian catastrophe refers to the period of time between 1947 to 1948. When the British mandate on Palestine ended with the announcement of the Israel state. Meanwhile, thousands of Palestinian people were massacred and forced by the Zionist militants to leave their houses and towns. Therefore, the Palestinian generation of 1948 are known by the generation of catastrophe, because they suffer the displacement, refuge, and nostalgia for the lost homeland. Palestinian catastrophe always discusses in terms of the postcolonial context. Palestinian people are not like the other colonized nations, because they still under the effect of Israeli occupation. The state of Israel functions within the paradigm and mindset of colonialism, which up till now perform the political, cultural, and economic pressure. This reality is quite opposite to the definition and the meaning of post-colonialism. The Palestinian catastrophe refers to a specific time and specific incident, but the aftermath of the catastrophe still affects the Palestinian's lives that makes it an everlasting catastrophe.

The post-colonial traumas are recognized by their accumulative and insidious nature. The collective nature of this experience stands with the collective nature of the colonial trauma in post-colonial contexts. The Palestinian catastrophe becomes a site of memory and a constitutive element of Palestinian identity. According to that, individual representation of collective memory contributes to the establishment of collective identity. The catastrophe becomes a site of memory, because it refers to all stories and experiences of those who have experienced the event, and those who comes after. Therefore, Palestinian identity cannot be confined to a personal level, but it is a combination of personal and collective one. Elias Khoury in his article *Rethinking the Nakba* (2012) describes the Palestinian Catastrophe as horrific experiences. A catastrophe that is yet happening and its torment is not as a memory but rather as day by day it is experienced. He contends that, the story of Palestinian's trauma cannot be told, not because it has not existed, but there is nobody to hear it. Ghassan Kanafani in his work *The Land of the Sad Oranges* (1962) said

I saw the long line of the big cars enter Lebanon leaving far away the land of orange... I started weeping in a loud sharp way... your mother was still locking in silence to the oranges... In your father's eye the reflection of all the orange trees he had left behind... All the clean orange trees he had planted one by one glittered in his face. He failed to stop the tears that fill up his eyes, when facing the police head officer. When we reached Saida, in the afternoon, we became refugees. (Kanafani, P200)

Kanafani shows that, the catastrophe becomes the official beginning of the Palestinian history and their identity. The collective memory is the center of the national identity. That plays a vital role

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in shaping people's self-perception, who have suffered the historical trauma. Furthermore, Ernest Renan in his book *What is a Nation?* (1882) clarifies that sharing sufferings can work as a unifying force. For him, the period of suffering is more worth than the times of glory and triumph, because it requires duties and demands common efforts. Integrating the idea of suffering as a unifying force and the Palestinian catastrophe as an identity sign in collective memory to get united and to move forward. Long-term suffering drives the Palestinian to find a source of comfort by integrating and seeking a sense of unified individuality to reform their identity. Identity formation needs to be sought not only at the individual level, but in the collective one to make the response to the catastrophic event as a unifying moment. The memory of the catastrophe gives an important idea to understand the relationship between the trauma and the memory on individual and collective levels. This what Radwa Ashour decides in her novel *The Woman from Tantoura*. She presents the act of trauma narrative as a mean of self-formation. When its effect on identity formation during the traumatic incident and the possibility of coexisting simultaneously with the traumatic experiences and their aftermaths.

### **- Memory as a Source of Empowering and Resistance.**

According to Astrid Erll in her article 'Traveling Memory' (2011) identified the importance of collective memories

The individual who share the collective images and narrative of the past, who practice mnemonic rituals, display an inherited habits and can draw on repertoires of explicit and implicit knowledge . . . All forms of Diaspora lead to diffusion of mnemonic media, contents, forms and practice across the global. (Traveling memories, Erll, 10).

Ruqayya always looks upon herself as a victim of her memories. She fails to escape from it. Through her character, Ashour presents the importance and the value of witnessing and recollection as means of survival and resilience. Ashour wants to assert that, through personal recollection, family stories, unofficial records, and the collective remembering the Palestinian catastrophe will exist in mind, not only as a historical event but as a part of their identity.

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 .P1).

Memories in this novel play an important role in providing the base to struggle the will of forgetting the catastrophic events. Ashour presents the need to remember as a mean of maintaining the identity and holding the dream to return. Ruqayya's son Hassan, who asks her to write down her

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memories of the catastrophe and its effects on her life and others. Ruqayya finds his request as an unfair obligation, because she does not want to relive the honorific event again, as she spent years to forget and put it aside to fade away. Despite it, she neither forgets nor pretends. These opposing forces present Ruqayya's complicated nature in a persisting colonial context. Does she inside the struggle or outside? Should her exploitation and victimization reject her obligation to resist marginalization, or should she take the path to forget it.

For the Palestinians, remembering works as an obligation to them, because it is the sole mean to assert their right to exist and prevent time from minimizing their sufferings. For them, the feeling of injustice continues for their entire life. Therefore, the act of recollection and memorialization become a political act. Their memories function as an alternate to the geographical and political recognition of the state. Furthermore, the ethical value of recollection and memories has a psychological effect, that helps in preventing future catastrophe, and enables the Palestinian to move on towards justice. Memories have power to change and create new frames of actions, by changing the relationship to the past through reviewing and modifying new values and attitudes. Within this context of the, Ashour adopts a similar attitude in her description of memory, where memory is equal to existence as a declaration of self-affirmation. Ruqayya's uncle repeats the stories of a homeland to his grandchildren. He tries his best to stamp the Palestine's map on their hearts. He refuses to stop his testimony work as a political act by recreating the memory of the catastrophe. Furthermore, Ruqayya keeps the key of her family home in Palestine around her neck as a necklace. She is not the only, but most of the Palestinian women do that even though their houses no longer exist. This custom recreates a unity between the past and the present. Their abilities to confirm their identity spin with their abilities to remember. Their testimony is not reduced to oral tails or written records, but it extends to the daily repeated habits of unnoticed resistance. This kind of resistance helps to create a resilient future. Resilience in this context can be achieved through the act of daily life and the insignificant actions. Memories and other daily repeated activities play a very important role in fuelling the will to continue fighting.

The best Example Ashour gives in this novel is the battle of dress. when Ruqayya's friend Wisal has a discussion with a strange person, who approaches her to comments on her Palestinian dress. He indicates that, it is an Israeli dress. Wisal follows him and makes it clear with anger and passion that, this dress is pure Palestinian and nothing else and, she will not allow any Israeli to take it from her "I worked late many nights to embroider this. It's called 'peasant embroidery, and this is a Palestinian peasant thawb. What does Israel have to do with it?" (Ashour. 256). In this incident, Ashour wants to show the ongoing appropriation of Palestinian Culture and heritage by Israeli

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discourse. Ashour wants to tell the story through, what seems to be irrelevant to the impressive narrative of history, that becomes a center core in her writing. She always makes use of everyday life such as eating habits, clothes, languages, songs, houses, and celebrations. Through these elements, Ashour wants to stand in the face of what she calls manipulation of words, by placing the people back to the land to claim their rights and to stand against all kinds of cultural and historical appropriation. Wisal is Ruqayya's friend is another witness to the Palestinian catastrophe. She acts as a personification of Palestinian heritage, that reveals the valuable aspects of culture and tradition

As soon as we entered the house I asked Maryam to make us coffee, Wisal Said "put off the coffee, let's put things away first." She rolled up her Sleeves and took one of the suitcase she had brought to the kitchen and squatted down beside it and started to make out food she had brought. She handed me three plastic bottles, tightly sealed , contain olive oil, and the three others she had put olives. . . this olive oil and olive from our trees, I would like to take that to Ruqayya even if she was living in an oil press. (Ashour .P326)

Ashour in this novel focuses on the aspects of Palestinian's experiences and daily life habits to set up the imagined cultural identities. This imagined cultural identity depends on the shared memories and cultural aspects. That provide a strong counterpart to the continuous deprivation of their rights and the lack of authority with the official platforms and international community, that the Palestinian have experienced. Ashour discusses the importance of memories and the perception from the first lines of the novel. When the protagonist Ruqayya remembers her first meeting with Yahya. She describes how differently she remembers the incident "Among the threshing floors were on the east side" in a different side of the town, away from the shore where she had seen him. Yet, Ruqayya leaves this ambiguity and says "I was tempted to run"(Ashour .P1). She wants to show the conflicting nature of memory and recollection, and how the struggle between the forgetfulness and the recollection accompanying the protagonist herself since her childhood. Sometimes The process of recollection reveals the painful aspects of life which can neither be forgotten nor silenced

What's the use of recalling what we endured and bringing it back in wards? When someone we love dies, we place him in shroud, wrapping him tenderly and digging deep in the earth, we weep, we know that we must bury him to go on with our lives ....suddenly I scream: Damn memory, damn its mother and father, damn the sky over it and the day it was and the day it will be, damn the files !

Lets it escape, let it go, may it never return.

Stretch out a sheet as you saw them doing, to cover what you saw throughout the years , and the day of the smell and the files.

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Leave the page blank, Ruqayya. (Ashour .p150)

Whenever Ruqayya tries to escape her memories Ashour brings her back. Ashour presents the process of remembering, as a documenting procedure. This practice of remembering is very important in reforming the Palestinian identity, since their identities are based on shared history, religion, culture, and suffering. In this novel, Ashour gives voice to the voiceless and speak on behalf of them. She takes up the role of creating the sources of memories which is opposed the dominant discourse, by giving voice to those who are silent. By doing so, Ashour challenges the dominant discourse by standing against the world of manipulation.

Through the eyes of Ruqayya, Ashour depicts the Palestinian catastrophe. Ruqayya remembers the day when she left her homeland as a child witnessing her father and two brothers' execution. This is the point where time is stopped for her. The only thing that occupy her presence is absence. Not only the absence of her family members or her homeland, but the absence of her voice, absence of everyday habits and the most important one is the absence of endless suffering. Ashour uses multi modes of remembering to emphasize the multiple nature of memory. The idea of multiplicity of memory increases the Palestinians' unifying force to reshaping their identity, since they share the same sufferings and miseries. Ruayya's visits to the refugee's camp emphasizes this part of Palestinian experiences

I don't understand which confuses me, because the elder women were telling me the stories of the theft of the land and of those they lost among their families and children ...The story reassure me, in some strange and wondrous way I can't understand. (Ashour .p 122)

The stories that Ruqayya shares with other Palestinian women give her the feeling that, she is not alone and her story is not the only one and her sufferings are real. This act of storytelling works as a survival mechanism that depends on the sharing of memories and recollections. The women who share their stories affirm that they will visit each other's villages once they return home. Ashour uses this strategy as a kind of refusal to acknowledge the reality on the ground and to revolt against the faith. Witnessing and sharing the memories work as a catalyst to fight for a better future, furthermore the effect of recollection and storytelling is not always guaranteed in a situation where politics overshadows the humanitarianism. In this context, victims used to narrate their stories in hope of finding someone to listen. It works as a transformative tool to achieve peace and reconciliation.

According to Maria Root's concept of Insidious trauma, traumatic experience are accumulative. It consists of a chain of practices of microaggression, where everyone is too small to be described as traumatizing, but together they create an immense traumatic effect. Racism in Afro-American and literature represent a traumatizing factor, because it contains multilayered acts of

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oppression, which have great effects on the subject and cause of destruction. Describing Radwa Ashour's novel within this context we can notice that, diaspora is the first and main experience that, Ruqayya and other characters suffer from. They are separated from their homeland, the rest includes refugee camps, the discriminations, the checkpoints, and the continuous acts of violence. All of these types of microaggression create inside the subject's psyche. Ruqayya from the beginning chooses silence as a form of resistance, rejecting to acknowledge the catastrophe or speak about it. Ruqayya's Silence dominate her life, through personal and collective experiences. She marries her husband out of silence, passively agrees to move to another country with her son and without her husband. She accompanies her daughter to finish her studies in the third exile. Finally, her voice emerges when she decides to return home.

The practice of recollection creates imaginary solidarity and unity the experiences of dislocation and fragmentation. Nostalgia for the homeland probably comes out from experiences such as forced migration, diminished communities, and the loss of identity. All these experiences create a kind of resistance and identity. The idea of cultural identities is an issue of becoming not rather than being. Therefore, the idea of national belongingness comes from the lack of official representations. People have to use whatever remains of traditions, memories and whatever is lost to reform their the national identity. The Palestinians suffer fragmentation, the rupture of the identity, and lack of political representation, therefore they use their personal and collective acts to reshape their identity. Ernest Renan in his book *What is a Nation* (1882) clarifies that, sharing suffering can be work as a unifying force. For him, the period of mourning is more effective than the triumph and glories, because it imposes duties and demand common efforts. Therefore, the Palestinian catastrophe represents a key site of the collective memories, and the part of Palestinian identities. Ashour in her novel portrays the Palestinian trauma as a state of self-assertion. That's why Ruqayya's uncle keeps repeating the same story of the homeland to his ancestor. He wanted them to keep the story of their homeland and the map of Palestine on their hearts. He performs a political act, by repeating the memory of the catastrophe and maintains the only reality he knew. On the other hand, Ruqayya keeps the key of her home close to her flesh, as most of the Palestinian women do despite the houses are no longer exist. Such habits create unity between the present and the past. The practices of recollection and the daily habits intertwines with their ability to reform their identities. Ashour uses multiple narratives to enrich the experience of Palestinian collectivity and to achieve unity through the shared suffering and experiences.

Witnessing and glorifying the past work as a unifying force and powerful inspiration for the survivors. That make them use their pain as fuel to fight for a better future. Sometimes witnessing

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and storytelling may not be guaranteed in a situation where politics overshadows the humanitarians. In such cases, victims can only narrate their experiences hoping to find somebody to listen, and to mobilize their suffering stories as a transformative tool to achieve justice.

My ancestors were masters of preservation. They preserved not only the memory of the dead but their bodies. However, I don't opt for the of mummification but for the role of eyes witnessing and scribe who has a story to tell, and whose need to tell it is as insistent as Igor's need to talk about the loss of his son in Anton Chekhov's " The Lament. " What others will do with it, is definitely a matter of their own concern. (Ashour .P 92)

### **Conclusion**

Radwa Ashour in her writings tries to explore the suppressed potential in her female characters. She clarifies that, women's problem is not widely regarded as the first priority for social change in the middle east. She suggests that, talented women writers may contribute to this position of women by exploring aspects of female experiences, that have remained unexplored for multiple reasons. In this sense, Ashour tries to expose women's hidden stories and daily life activities, which are equally important to the function of society. In her novel *The Woman from Tantoura* Ashour discusses the Palestinian catastrophe through the character Ruaqayya, who survives and endures the diaspora. Through the character of Ruqayya and her family, Ashour describes the different paths that the Palestinian force to take after the catastrophic. How they are affected by the long nature of the struggle. Searching for hidden stories and retelling the glory of the past always use to overcome the misery of the present. It imposes an imaginary coherence to the experiences of dislocation and fragmentation. The image of homeland and trouble experiences resulting from forced migration, loss of identity and diminished communities recapture an imagined fullness and provide a source of resistance and identity. These things make a narrative interesting and enlightening as well.

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