

TRAUMA THEORY IN APPROACHING MORRISON'S HOME AND FAQIR'S WILLOW TREES DON'T WEEP

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ABSTRACT:

This is a comparative study between Toni Morrison's (2012) *Home*, an Afro-American writer, and Fadia Faqir's (2014) *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, an Arab-British writer, both of which intend to make the reader aware of the plights and predicaments of the oppressed children left unprotected by their relatives who set out to join valueless wars (Korean, Afghanistan). Indeed, they develop a lifelong trauma, yet they have to learn to mitigate these psychological wounds. The research question is about how trauma is depicted and portrayed in both novels. Through the application of a descriptive and analytical analysis with trauma theory, light is shed on some common social, political, and psychological implicit and explicit themes. The study findings would show that Morrison and Faqir depict the profound impact of wars on the suffering of their characters where we conclude that leaving children unprotected neither by brotherly nor fatherly shields at an early age is indifferent to their race and nationality. The implications of their narratives would be relevant to any discussion that purports to limit countries engagement in most wars worldwide.

Keywords: (Morriosn; Faqir; Wars; Trauma; Childhood)

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1. Introduction :

It is undeniable that different people experience the same event differently, that different people approach the same literary text differently. One person may be offended by a character's actions, while another finds them comic. One reader is strengthened by a story's political implications, while another is inspired by the same story's philosophical bent. Literary theories emerged as ways to explain different people's views and responses to literature. Rather than insisting that one view is the best or correct view over the other, literary theories attempt to find value in all views that are based on a careful study of the literature.

Quite often, we all hear that a problem clearly stated is a problem half solved” (Kothari 2004: 26). While the themes of gender and identity have occupied a wide area in women's writing, the problem to be investigated in this study is to examine the traumatized children in the narratives of two marginalized groups, Morrison's *Home*, by an African-American writer and Faqir's *Willow Trees Don't Weep* (WTDW, henceforth), by an Arab-British writer.

In this research, we intend to compare traumatized female main characters in both texts who endure painful and prolonged hegemony and indifference which oppress them and confuse the relationships between all the members of their families. Cee and Najwa are cases in point, since their childhood both of them were left unprotected by their relatives who set out to join valueless wars (Korean, Soviet). Accordingly, they developed a lifelong trauma. To reach this goal, the work is guided by the following research question: How is trauma depicted and portrayed in both novels? This is supported on what is stated by Whitehead, with the rise of trauma theory, novelists' concern has shifted away from what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered (2004: 3)

This comparative study provides academics and in particular students with an understanding of trauma, a literary critical theory, as a supplemental text to approach the select novels, Faqir's WTDW which introduces some themes that are reminiscent of Morrison's *Home*, from a variety of practical and theoretical positions and equip them with a working knowledge to articulate interpretations and responses. To understand why we differently respond to a text, we must first understand the literary theory and the literary criticism.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Literary Theory vs Literary Criticism

Writing about the difference between literary theory and criticism also urgently demands respect and scrutiny. According to Matthew Arnold, a nineteenth-century literary critic, (qtd by Charles & Bressler, 2011), literary criticism is " *A disinterested*

endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world."

This, tacitly, means that literary criticism attempts to describe, analyze, interpret, and evaluate any piece of literature. Basic questions on philosophical, psychological, political, social, and functional matters can arise whilst analyzing a text. And it is through this activity that critics and readers engage in literary criticism.

Anyone who responds to a text espouses some kind of literary theory generated from experiences, a matter of habit or past teachings, or reading other literary works. The articulation of these theoretical framework when reading a novel, short story, poem, or any other type of literature helps critics and readers to value or critique actions, peoples and cultures. Accordingly, literary criticism could not exist without literary theory that undergirds our understanding and interpretation of texts. It provides support and firm basis for our analysis of texts. Additionally, literary theory can be more understood by referring to the etymology of the word *theory* which derives from the Greek word *theoria*, meaning "a view or perspective of the Greek stage." The way we interpret a text is like taking a different seat in the theatre and thereby obtaining a different view of the stage. These perspectives will change according to the readers' background, culture, their political, religious, or social views (Charles & Bessler: 8).

2.2 Trauma Theory: Literary and Critical Perspective

The term trauma comes from the Greek word meaning "wound". It was first used in English in the domain of medicine in the seventeenth century, it is originally denoting physical injury caused by an external agent (Luckhurst:2). However, the meaning of trauma has mutated from the physical to the mental realm since the nineteenth century. It is now used to describe emotional scars and traces left on the mind after experiencing painful and dramatic events. Recently, the entire world culture is affected by trauma and characterized as traumatic or post-traumatic, one way and another. Our traumatized new life is also expressed by reference to horrific events such as terrorist attacks, school shootings, road accidents, and earthquakes or more recently COVID-19 pandemic and its adverse effect "lockdown".

The study of trauma and its psychological consequences is a predominantly Anglo-American preoccupation. Trauma theory has been developed primarily in the United States, notably in the fields of medicine and psychoanalysis, and have subsequently been taken up by other disciplines, including literature and cultural studies. With its origins primarily in research of the Holocaust, trauma studies are now an academic discipline in its own right. As Cathy Caruth states, "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (1996: 4).

Much attention within trauma theory has been dedicated to events, like the Holocaust, 9/11, which took place in Europe or the United States, and currently Russia-Ukraine War (Buelens et al. 55). However, an equal and due recognition must be given to those belonging to non-Western or minority culture as Afghanistan/Iraq War, Korean War, Vietnam War, and to other incalculable sites of sufferings or the still- unsettled legacy of colonialism as the Palestinian/Israeli or Western Sahara/Morocco conflicts. Trauma theory gives more privilege to Western citizens whose traumatic experiences are willingly acknowledged contrary to victims of traumatic events from Africa and Asia who are prevented from being recognized as traumatized, trauma counselling, receiving compensation, and psychiatric treatment generally available in Western societies (Davis & Hanna:5). In this context, comprehensive histories of trauma is needed to cover the mental and psychological events that will happen globally (20-21).

Since trauma is nearly everywhere in our daily lives, it is trivialized to the point that it becomes useless referring to inconsequential, eventually harmless niggles. Nevertheless, , implicated or not, all victims, survivors and bystanders directly affected by traumatic experiences want to talk and write about trauma to pronounce issues of collective responsibility. This politics of resistance will inevitably stand against inherited structural violence and past atrocities which can be perpetuated in the present and the future. Important channel to raise such issues is narration well

represented in feminist literature which often plays an outsized role to communicate traumatic discourse (Davis and Hanna 1). Similarly, feminist writers have often contributed to the increasing interest in literary trauma theory. Morrison and Faqir are respectively among many others who have challenged the Eurocentric canon making the non-Western's trauma recognized. Hartman states that:

"Trauma has become such an essential concept for many critics in the field of literature since they perceived an intimate relationship between "wound" and "words", trauma and literature, and even trauma and language. They considered that this new awareness was ethical as well as clinical"(1995:541)

The above-mentioned quote comes to rebut the very often texts on trauma theory which marginalize the traumatic experiences of non-Western cultures and instead introduces new and fertile ground of research in postcolonial trauma and literature.

3. Methodology

According to Chinn and Kramer (2011: qtd by Nguyen et al, 2022), "a research study can be classified as 'theory-linked research' when the research question, research objectives and the design and conduct of that study are guided by a theory." This research paper, however, adopts the theory of trauma in approaching two literary texts and it employs a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research with its true nature which is to give voice to vulnerable groups of people in society (Willig, 2017 qtd by Nguyen et al, 2022), in alignment with theory, remains diverse, be it highly inductive or sparse deductive.

Comparison is amongst the essential critical thinking strategies that can be employed in any act of analysis. As literature is embracing different cultures and working on a global scale, discrepancy seems inevitable. The space of comparison has expanded beyond literary texts and involves distinction between Western cultures and non-Western cultures despite the fact that the idea of differentiation is frequently

seen as old-fashioned at best and retrograde at worst. (Felski and Friedman:1)
Reading a literary text in parallel with another contributes further to their meanings for no work of art has its complete meaning alone, we must set it for contrast and comparison.

In order to achieve the purpose of this study, it becomes necessary to apply a descriptive (How is a wound put into words) and analytical (why literature, story, and not just events, history) approach within the scope of trauma theory with reference to Morrison's *Home* and Faqir's *WTDW*. Besides, this study is comparative since there is a considerable overlap between the two texts. There are many good reasons to compare the two selected novels. For example, the epic journey in both texts shares common themes as the main female protagonists are subjugated both mentally and physically in infancy because they were left unprotected by their main male relatives to join valueless wars.

4. Results and Discussion

Although the novels are set in two different cultures, yet some common points exist regarding the experience of traumatic events by both female protagonists, Najwa and Cee in the above-mentioned texts. The literature of the narratives strengthens the paradigm of trauma and helps understand its psychological and physical consequences. As time went, categories of people who might be diagnosed with traumatic signs have expanded to include witnesses, bystanders(the case of Najwa), and the victim status extended to include receiving news of the death or injury of relatives (the case of Frank, Cee's brother) (Luckhurst:1)

4-1 *Home*

Toni Morrison is a maven African-American novelist. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. She has written eleven novels to date, and her masterpiece is *Beloved* (1987). She has won many awards as the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Noble Prize for literature (1993). Her latest novels are *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015). She died in 2019.

Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012) tells the story of Frank Money, the protagonist who had returned with a deep loathing of the Korean War after traumatic experiences on the front lines. He was shocked after receiving a letter from his beloved sister Ycidra, known as Cee. The latter was medically abused by a white doctor who was practising eugenic experiments on her. He started his journey (modern odyssey) home, a year after being discharged from an integrated army, along a thorny road from a hospital in Seattle all the way to Georgia where they were already haunted.

Home, like Toni Morrison's other novels, could be read as trauma fiction. The novelist has explored how racially-prejudiced America is during the 1950s and the dire effects on blacks both physically and psychologically. Throughout the novel, we travel along with Cee, the female protagonist who has been the victim of some hateful childhood experiences, and has felt devastating traumatic effects due to racial hatred, parents neglect, marriage failure, war and eugenics.

Since the very beginning, we could see how racial trauma surrounded the African American characters. Lynching black people is common, for example white foremen used to treat their workers violently as slaves. They were hung, burned, or tortured. In *Home*, we could see how Cee is scared of a group of white people who lynched a black man and buried the body, "we saw them pull a body from a wheelbarrow and throw it into a hole already waiting [...] when she saw that black foot with its creamy pink and mud-streaked sole being whacked into the grave, her body began to shake" (*Home*, 2012: 4). In this excerpt, Morrison depicts the brutality of discrimination black children experience. Cee and her brother Frank are traumatized after they have witnessed men throwing away a black corpse when they are children.

Morrison portrays the physical and psychological abuse of the siblings, especially Cee who has experienced other appalling conditions, this time she suffers the neglect of her parents. As her family were forced to leave Bandera County, she

was born on the road without roof over her head. She does not receive any affection from her parents because they work on plantation from morning till night, "Their parents were so beat by the time they came home from work, any affection they showed was like a razor-sharp, short and thin. Lenore was the wicked witch. Frank and Cee, like some forgotten Hansel and Gretel, locked their hands to imagine a future" (53). Cee could not live with Lenore, her mean and unfair grandmother.

Morrison's novel does not only disclose the direct appalling ordeals of war rather she questions its dire consequences on the self. In the absence of Frank who is enlisted as a soldier in the armed services. Cee runs off with a boy. His name is Principal, but he calls himself Prince who claims to love her and marry her. Soon afterwards, he abandons her in Atlanta, "When Prince left her to her own devices" (34). These traumatic conditions oblige her to find a job. With a deficient education, she goes to work for a doctor called Beauregard Scott and falls a prey to his eugenics-based experiments.

Another point that could be deduced from the representation of trauma in *Home* was that Morrison delves into eugenics on African Americans. As Brinkley has pointed out, "New scholarly theories argued that the introduction of immigrants into America society was polluting the nation's racial stock. Among the theories created to support this argument was eugenics" (535). Dr. Beau, is a white doctor, who is, on the one hand, a practitioner of Eugenics aiming at saving the whites' lives and improving their mental and physical characteristics, and on the other hand, working on damaging black women's fertility through harmful experiments on their wombs. Indeed, he used Cee to perform some experiments on her body to the extent where she almost died through these violent actions. This is the reason why Frank, who has been in the Korean War (1950-1953), has to hurry back to Georgia in order to save his younger sister. He receives a letter which reads "Come fast. She be dead if you tarry"(8). Frank's journey back home epitomizes the rescuing mission about the brutality of the white physician and eventually Cee is successfully set free.

"Frank walked into the room where his sister lay still and small

In her white uniform. Asleep? He felt her pulse. Light or none?
 He leaned in to hear breath or no breath. She was cool to the
 Touch, none of the early warmth of death. Frank knew death
 And this was not it- so far. Glancing quickly around the little
 Room, he noticed a pair of white shoes, a bedpan and Cee's
 Pocket-book. He rummaged in the purse and shoved the twenty
 Dollars he found there into his pocket. Then he knelt by Cee's bed,
 Slid his arms under her shoulders and knees, cradled her in his arms,
 And carried her up the stairs" (74)

The quote stated above expresses the major setback black people endure, particularly women. Cee is abused by the doctor and hurt so badly that she becomes infertile, though she is taken in and nursed back to health by a community of women in *Lotus* "your womb can't never bear fruit" (128). Morrison depicts different sorts of trauma like parents neglect, marriage failure, war, and eugenics black children and women undergo from their society and their family. Additionally, Cee is indirectly worst affected by the Korean war after Frank has been enlisted in the army. She has been left uncontrolled, "When Cee and a few other girls reached fourteen and started talking about boys, she was prevented from any real flirtation because of her big brother, Frank"(33). Inevitably, she becomes as eugenic guinea pig at the hands of a white doctor.

At the end of the novel, Morrison raises the question about the provision of both the main character and the community members care for the traumatized. The psychological and physical pain has been mitigated because Cee is saved from real death by Frank and then healed after a few months in the care of the women of the local community through homeopathy by providing her with the physical and spiritual support. "would never again need rescue"(129). This discloses who truly bears the responsibility of atrocities as well as revealing who really offers health-care services.

The author of *WTDW* is Fadia Faqir, a Jordanian British writer, who was born in Amman and moved to Britain. She now lives in County Durham, England where she works as a teaching fellow in Durham University. She is the author of four novels to date: *Nisanit*, *Pillars of Salt*, *My Name is Salma* and *Willow Trees Don't Weep*. She often writes on issues related to gender, identity, and culture.

Fadia Faqir's *WTDW* tells the story of a young woman. After the death of her mother at the age of three, Najwa decides to trace her father, Omar Rahman, who walks out on her and her mother in a long epic journey to join the jihad fighters in Afghanistan. She starts a journey from Jordan where she was born, then evolves through other neighbouring countries including Pakistan and Afghanistan, and eventually ends in Britain.

This novel is a form of trauma in a number of ways, as clearly seen, from the very beginning, Najwa, the novel's protagonist has been exposed to indifference and negligence at home. First, she is a victim of father neglect who departed from her at an early age to take part in a valueless war in Afghanistan as a jihadist, she was just three years old. Her mother, Raneen, died and she was left with her grandmother, Zainab. "Now your mother is dead, you have to go and look for your father. My father, Omar Rahman, who walked out on us when I was three, [...]" (*WTDW*, 2014:6). Being left unprotected with too old grandmother, Faqir depicts her female protagonist as innocent in an interview while introducing her book (as cited by Sarnou, 2017: 2). This young woman has already torn between her mother's secularism and father's fundamentalism who has prioritized religion over his loved daughter and wife.

Another example that falls within the scope of traumatic experiences is the tyranny of the secular mother who has exercised power on her daughter. The way she educated her is totally different from her conservative society. She wanted her to become secular like herself by preventing her from going to religious events or meeting religious people." I lost my husband to religion, and I have no intention of

offering my daughter on a plate to the nasty sheikhs. My name wouldn't be Raneen if I allowed that!" (24-25). Additionally, Najwa had not a happy childhood, she was banned from practicing her Islamic conventional dress and behavior, afraid of her tyrant mother. "I knew I was different. I was not allowed to cover my head, wear a long school uniform or trousers, recite the Qur'an, participate in the Ramadan procession or wear prayer clothes and go to the mosque in the evening with the other children,"(9).

Similarly, the absence of her father in a patriarchal society makes her different to the point that she is considered ignored and humiliated "... no one visited us. No male guardian, no honour, no status in this neighbourhood" (5). Furthermore, it destroys her marriage prospects. In fact, because of the absence of a male relative in their family, their neighbour's son was not allowed to marry her. His father did not approve: "Najwa is not marriage material, his father said, because, rumour has it, her father is a drug baron somewhere on the borders of China. Also, brought up in a house without men, she wouldn't know how to show my son respect and tend him." (10) This makes her humiliated by the society and subsequently, she was forced to have her first sexual experience on her journey to Britain.

After the death of her long-ill mother, Najwa was unable to live without a male guardian. Consequently, to construct her self-identity, she had no other choice but to search for her father who joined the jihadists in Afghanistan along a thorny journey from Jordan to England. She points out: "I had no option but to find my father" (23). Without him, she feels isolated and unprotected especially in such conservative and patriarchal society. She adds: "... being the daughter of an absent father, they saw me as common land, without fence or borders" (15). Another instance that aggravates her situation of being alone is when she does not have any male relative who could accompany her to apply for a passport defying the patriarchal rules, for the man who is at the level of Identity and Passport Service asked her harshly "...Why are you here alone? I have no male relatives. He sized me up. I don't believe you. Did you grow out of a tree?" (51).

While trying to trace her father from Jordan to Britain through Afghanistan, Najwa has some shocking experiences in the hope of finding him. She has been trapped in war regions where she witnesses destructive conflicts that take place between American soldiers and mujahidin (Islamic fighters). "In that hush after the drone attack and among the destruction and desolation, ..." (162). Najwa experiences the atrocities of war where her half-sister, Amani, the daughter of her step-mother Gulnar, dies of a drone attack in the battle field. She is unable to shed tears after this traumatic event due to the lack of affection in her life.

Najwa's tragic journey did not stop in the mountains of Afghanistan, she continues her quest travelling to England. Hopefully, she will find Omar. Yet, she suffers extreme torment having her first sexual experience with Andy, an Englishman she has met on the airplane. He has left her after he learns that she is the daughter of a terrorist. "... Did men lose interest in women after they had slept with them? ...[...] ...Who would want the daughter of a terrorist? I bit my lip until it tore and blood seeped out and spread, tart and sour, on my tongue " (210). Najwa has been left with a sense of guilt for transgressing the bounds of her father and grandmother's religion.

At the end of the journey, Najwa decides to go home "... I must go back to sweep my mother's grave" (276) so as to reconcile herself to the cruelty inherited from her mother and the society. This is when she meets her father in Durham who is sentenced to death and other good British people, particularly Elizabeth who borrows her some books. Going back to Jordan and having seen and talked to her father mitigates her pain in some sort.

It seemed from the analysis that the female protagonist has experienced several traumatic events through her long journey from Jordan all the way to England. Despite the fact that she succeeds to find her father, this thorny journey puts her into adverse psychological troubles. She has been left unprotected at an early age with departed father, dead mother, too old grandmother, she has been witness to a terrible

war, and finally, she has been sexually abused by a foreigner. However, at the end of her journey, Najwa succeeds to find her father and meets other good people in Durham. This may mitigate her arduous journey.

5. Conclusion:

This study concludes that the two novels present some common points such as the plights and predicaments of the oppressed women left unprotected by their relatives who set out to join valueless wars (Korean, Soviet). Both *Willow Trees Don't Weep* and *Home* are trauma fiction, which is nearly related to postcolonial women narratives and trauma theory can be useful in analyzing and understanding literature represented in diaspora, displacement, sexual, racial, and women violence, to mention but few. In *Home* and *WTDW*, war-related trauma arises from the wars that take place in Korea and Afghanistan. Both Frank and Omar prompt feelings of guilt when they realize that their going to wars left Cee and Najwa unprotected. By embracing trauma theory and literary criticism (its practical application), we are not in danger of blindly accepting other's beliefs as well as we can give voice to the unquestioned prejudices and assumptions. Using trauma theory to study literature should be dialogical, twofold process, in which the theory and the analysed objects mutually inform each other.

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