



Nada Jarrar's *A Good Land*: A Multilateral Trauma

Sana' Mahmoud Jarrar^{[a],*}

^[a]PhD, Department of English Language, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts/UNRWA, Amman, Jordan.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Trauma is not restricted to a particular place or a particular time. War memories intrude all nations and traumatize them. Following the crisis of the civil war in Lebanon, the invasion upon Palestine, the misery of Holocaust, and the wretchedness of World War II, many literary texts tackle them to show the traumatic experience of the individual. *A Good Land* by Nada Jarrar describes different traumatized nations and shows how the effect of trauma is one upon many individuals from different backgrounds. This research sets out to prove that the three different characters in the novel suffer from trauma. Kamal represents the Palestinian traumatic experience, Laila represents the Lebanese traumatic experience, and Margo represents the Jewish traumatic experience. This study focuses on the basic concepts of trauma. It shows how trauma affects identity. In addition, it displays the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and examines how different characters present different symptoms.

The research discusses the novel's thematic representation of trauma. It focuses on trauma theory specifically the idea of "acting out" that is explained by Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth. Moreover, the study shows the impact of trauma on identity through using the work of Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué. Eventually, this research sets out to prove the possibility of representing trauma in *A Good Land* by Nada Jarrar.

Key words: Trauma; Lebanon; Palestine; The holocaust

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INTRODUCTION

A Good land is considered one of the first literary attempts to portray the Israeli aggression on Lebanon in the summer of 2006. It portrays the damage that affected the Lebanese people as a result of the aggression. The novel shows that the woe the Lebanese people passed and still passing as a result of the aggression is not much different from the mass genocide the Jews witnessed by the Nazi regime during the Second World War as well as the aggression the Palestinians witnessed by the Israeli occupation in 1984. In other words, in *A Good Land*, which was written originally in English, the writer shows that the human suffering, even when happens in different locations and times, is linked together and does not distinguish between people according to their religions, races and homelands.

A war environment is rife with opportunities for exposure to traumatic events of many types. War is neither restricted to a specific place nor a specific time. Therefore, trauma is not confined to a specific region, religion, race or origin. It penetrates anyone who is exposed to a harsh war experience.

Many literary texts encompass many topics as the events of wars and their effects on the individual's psychology and physiology. *A Good Land* which is a novel by Nada Jarrar, who was born in Lebanon to a Lebanese father and Australian mother, represents war as a universal phenomenon that perforates nations' psych and traumatizes them. War damages the external and internal life of the individuals. In addition, this novel gathers the

victims who are from different origins in Lebanon. They have been exposed to a cruel past that is full of wars, loss, bombardments, killings and massacres. The novel conflates Kamal, Laila, and Margo who represent diverse types of traumatic experiences. Kamal represents the Palestinians traumatic experience, Laila represents the Lebanese traumatic experience and Margo represents the Jewish traumatic experience.

1. MAIN TEXT

A Good Land seeks to achieve a dual aim. On one hand, the novel portrays the suffering of the Lebanese people as a result of the repeated Israeli aggressions on Lebanon through portraying the negative effects of these aggressions on the daily life of the citizens. On the other hand, the events of the novel to ensure the connection of the human fate in all places and times and events. The suffering of both the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples as a result of the repeated Israeli aggressions is not different from the Jews' suffering during the Second World War on the hands of the Nazi regime.

By showing how different nations suffer from trauma, Jarrar demonstrates that history is in the process of re-enacting itself. In *A Good Land*, trauma transcends all borders of time and place. Accordingly, Jarrar creates sympathy, dialogue, and harmony among these different representatives of different traumatized nations since humanity does not know any kind of prejudice. For example, Kamal's thoughts go beyond Lebanon where he can touch the lives of others. The intimacy between nations leads them to think of each other. He has thought of the annihilating loss of Palestine that has followed the Holocaust massacres. He has also thought of the civil war in Lebanon and the refugees who have been expelled from their homes. Moreover, he has touched the guilt that has dominated Germany. All nations suffer from trauma despite their origins, religions and regions. Kamal is a writer and his novels are based on the idea that "all human tragedies are interconnected" (Jarrar, 2010, p.105).

This novel goes through the Lebanese civil war and the diverse sectarian situation that have dominated Lebanon with unusual difficulty. The nation has lived in a state of constant fear; people have lost the meaning of freedom, inner peace, and the sense of happiness. In addition, this has resulted in forceful durable effects on the Lebanese national psych that has traumatized them. Moreover, the Second World War with its unprecedented ferociousness that has resulted in countless massacres has deeply affected the lives of those who go through it. In addition, the horrible invasion over Palestine has disintegrated the Palestinians' life and torn their existence to mere shreds. They have become wounded and traumatized. Furthermore, the Holocaust has left a traumatic scar on all the Jews. Herrero and Baelo-Allué (2011) state that the Holocaust has been treated as a unique, unprecedented

atrocities (p.xi). Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub state that the Holocaust is a "massive trauma" (Herrero & Baelo-Allué, 2011).

Jarrar shows the harmony among all victims who come from different origins and who have different religions. Trauma and the wretchedness of the world gather them in Lebanon. Trauma haunts Laila with her memories that she cannot leave behind. On the same wavelength, trauma haunts Margo who tries to abate her misery through smoking. Last but not the least, trauma haunts Kamal and that is demonstrated with his papers and pins trying to gather his thoughts and write them down. Suffering is the core of their relationship. Their torture breaks the borders among them where they sympathize with each other.

Trauma has been defined by many scholars. One source defines trauma as a "wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim's experience of time, self, and the world and that causes a great emotional anguish in the individual" (Herrero & Baelo-Allué, 2011, p.x). "If the Freudian name for the "unknown knows" is the Unconscious, the Freudian name for the "unknown unknowns" is *trauma*, the violent intrusion of something radically unexpected, something the subject was absolutely not ready for, something the subject cannot integrate in any way" (Žižek, 2006, p.10). Ruth Leys (2002) explains that "the experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as past*, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present" (p.2).

War experience asphyxiates people and disrupts their life. They become vulnerable and defenseless. Fearfulness usurps their souls and threatens their being. War traumatizes them. Sara Benamer and Kate White (2008) believe that trauma occurs when someone is subjected to an ominous experience "actual or perceived" that threatens to his life. Therefore, this person is confronted with overpowering feelings of "helplessness," "terror" and "annihilation of life" (p.16).

This research applies trauma theory to *A Good Land*. Trauma theory focuses on "acting out." LaCapra (2011) defines "acting out" in her work *Writing History Writing Trauma* as when

One is haunted by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of the traumatic scenes-scenes in which the past return and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop. In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. (p.21)

Caruth, who is one of the most understanding theorists of trauma, puts trauma in relation to Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). According to Caruth, "In trauma ... the outside has gone inside without any mediation" (1996, p.59). In addition, Caruth (2006) states that trauma is "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled

repetitive, appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (p.11). In *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, critical Theory*, LaCapra (2004) states that “trauma is itself a shattering experience that disrupts or even threatens to destroy experience in the sense of an integrated or at least variably articulated life” (p.117).

This research focuses on the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that are demonstrated by the three traumatized characters. There are many symptoms of PTSD. In *The PTSD Workbook: Simple, Effective Techniques for Overcoming Traumatic Stress Symptoms*, Mary Williams and Soili Poijula (2002) describe all the symptoms in detail. Anger is considered to be the frequent symptom of (PTSD). Flashbacks and nightmares may flood the traumatized person. Frequently, the traumatized person has ceaseless and obtrusive memories of the event or frequent depressing dreams in which the event can be repeated or otherwise represented. These flashbacks are short but can be associated with depression and heightened arousal. Insomnia may occur as a way of shielding the person from danger, both day and night. Avoidance is another symptom of PTSD. The traumatized person often tries hard to bypass thoughts, feelings, or conversations about the traumatic event. This avoidance includes amnesia of the traumatic event. Dissociation or “numbing out” are often experienced by the traumatized person. Dissociating from the painful feelings includes numbing all emotions to the extent that the traumatized person may appear to be cold, passive, and superficial. Another common symptom is grief and depression. The traumatized person may have feelings of sadness, weeping periods, and sometimes thoughts of committing suicide. Feelings of guilt and shame may occur frequently as well. They often result from something the person did or did not do to stop the traumatic event or help the victim. (pp.17-20).

The abovementioned symptoms are explained within the research. Laila has been born in Lebanon and witnessed the disaster of the civil war since she has been a child. Her parents have migrated to Australia. After many years she has decided to come back to Lebanon. She is too weak to resist this decision. “I have at times had to admit that in staying here (Lebanon) I am only resigning myself to the inevitable, acknowledging a pull that I know I am unable to resist” (Jarrar, 2010, p.16). In addition, Kamal is a Palestinian refugee who has escaped with his family from the hostile war environment in Lebanon. Trauma usurps his existence. Finally, Margo is a Holocaust survivor. She has participated in the Second World War which has traumatized her. She has come to Lebanon after wandering many places aimlessly. This research shall prove that these characters suffer from trauma where the symptoms appear belatedly. They suffer from trauma when they have come to Lebanon which means that trauma attacks them after the war experience has ended.

Trauma and PTSD symptoms shall be discussed within the research. Kamal, Laila and Margo suffer from trauma, and they act out these experiences belatedly. According to Caruth, “The traumatic event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it (Caruth, 1995, p.4). Memories keep haunting Laila, and they return as an intrusive response through dreams and flashbacks. She has looked at the window “day dreaming into the future” and then she falls in “darkness” (Jarrar, 2010, p.4). She is obsessed with her childhood memories during the civil war. They invade her forcefully every now and then. “I remember childhood as a breezy existence that was only interrupted when civil war broke out, the grown-ups around me taking on a sudden heaviness in their manner, an anxious air, their brows even furrowed” (Ibid., p.8).

The invasion of past memories into Laila’s present cannot be resisted. She always feels as if she is lost between reality and dreams. She always looks for reassuring answers for leaving her life in Australia, leaving her parents, and being in Lebanon. Her memories suffocate her and pull her back to Lebanon where she is too weak to resist them. “When the one we left behind us still clings to me even as I attempt to escape it” (Ibid., p.10). She is not able to leave her past behind her.

Thoughts that are related to traumatic events are stored in the mind, and they can be played back like a tape cassette in a video recorder. As a result, individuals are tormented psychologically of the repetition of memories that possess their minds every now and then. Margo always records the history of those whom she has lost during the war: “So many of the older generation were killed during the war that I felt as important to remember them in some way” (Ibid., p.171).

The novel illustrates a reliving experience that haunts Kamal’s being. He remembers many things that are related to the war. He is fluctuating between present time and past time. The line between them is blurred in Kamal’s mind. “Later, when Kamal allows himself to think of what happened next, he remembers the soldier’s face, lean and sharp-featured and hint of something in his dark brown eyes” (Ibid., p.221). In addition, when he goes to the apartment where his family has used to live, “He heard the sadness” (Ibid., p.115). He is a part of the past and a part of the present. He also remembers the camp and the refugees.

This illustrates how the different traumatized characters always move to the past not to the future. Future has no place in their life. They talk about their experiences. Nonetheless, they are confused and exhausted, so they cannot reveal it all. “Kamal and Margo speak of their past as though they could relive it through words.... There is much that she does not tell him about herself, he knows, though he cannot fault her in this because he finds himself unwilling to reveal it all” (Ibid., p.132).

These memories are rough and perforate their existence by force. They are willing to avoid them, but these memories reside in the unconsciousness where there is no way to escape them. This repetition of remembering the traumatic experience indicates that they are not normal memories but traumatic memories.

Jarrar also tries to demonstrate public trauma through describing the atmosphere of the city itself. *A Good Land* is an amalgam of public and private traumas. Within the framework of DeLillo's novel, the private arena is not a realm detached from the public world. Indeed, throughout the novel, the reader can notice that the border between the public and private spheres has been erased. Society is a human output, and nothing but a human output, that yet constantly acts back upon its producer. On one hand, there can be no public reality apart from the individual. On the other hand, every individual biography is a ring within the chain of society. According to Raymond Williams (1961), "Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life, yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms" (p.278). The novel depicts trauma in the public sphere in its first scene. The novel starts with sorrow, chaos, and destruction. The novel shows the anchor of trauma in the city itself, Beirut, which has been lost in the present because of what it has confronted in the past: "Yet the city no longer possesses obvious beauty. Areas...lack character and real sense of community" (Jarrar, 2010, p.3). Beirut becomes isolated without embracing any means of communication. Beirut can no longer breathe, and it is covered with "buried sorrows." It becomes inflicted with trauma. The "city.....loose its light, its color fading, its energy sapped" (Ibid., p.204). It becomes weak and fragile.

Trauma affects the internal and external world of individuals that are the backbone of his identity. Identity becomes shattered and cluttered as a result of trauma. Therefore, the culture itself is inflicted with trauma where its victims suffer to death. Caroline Gorland (2002) states that "the individual has a constitution and history which have shaped his internal world; hence a character and personality. He also has a culture. So he is more or less vulnerable to that particular moment in his developmental history" (p.23). "They have seen their sense of identity shattered by traumatic experience" (Herrero & Baelo-Allué, 2011, p.x).

Traumatized individuals see that their existence and their being break into pieces and fall a part. When Laila has come back to Lebanon, she has felt that she is deprived from the ability to touch her true existence. In addition, she is always hesitant and uncertain if she has done the right decision or not. Laila looks for reassuring answers for her bewilderment every now and then. "I remain silent and look out into the street, gathering the thoughts about me"(Jarrar, 2010, p.5). She moves in the

present but in reverse. Trauma devastates her sense of identity and she tries to find herself in this chaos: "Try to picture the me that come before this" (Ibid., p.9).

Kamal who represents the Palestinian trauma understands the loss of his identity. Kamal with his cluttered papers and books is lost in the hell of existence. He is overwhelmed by the fact of his fragile existence. In addition, he decides to be a writer so that he can gather the shreds of his memory and prove that he has a position in the world. He lives "two half lines" part of his past "roots" and part from his present "routs". He is as "someone with fluid identity" (Ibid., p.103).

Margo travels to many places hoping to find herself in this horrible world. She has escaped her past that is heavily covered with the Second World War events. She is lost between her past and present. She is neither here nor there. She is shattered even after her death.

One of the symptoms of trauma is imagining many things that are related to the war that has been experienced or wars that others have gone through. Caruth (1996) asserts that trauma arrives to a cultural memory of events, "not witnessed directly, making us all survivors and turning history into a memory in which can we all participate" (p.67). Margo, a Holocaust survival, has participated in the Second World War. She is traumatized by the horrible experience of the war. The harmony and the intimacy among nations lead the traumatic individuals to imagine other's experiences. For example, Laila imagines Margo in the middle of the war:

Alone at night, I dream Margo's stories, a long-drawn out dream with a multitude of characters and Margo... I am Margo sixty years ago, a Resistance fighter in the Second World War in the field of France in the dead night, the smells and sounds around me as a sharp edges as a briars." (Ibid., p.19)

In *Trauma and Memory* (1997), people who suffer from PTSD always make efforts to avoid any conversations and thoughts that are related to the traumatic experience. In addition, they make efforts to avoid places or people who arouse a recollection of trauma. Moreover, this avoidance can extend to a more generalized withdrawal from intimate relationships and meaningful activities, feeling of detachment and estrangement from others (Applebaum, Uyehara, & Elin, 1997, p.228).

Avoidance and emotional numbing are demonstrated clearly by Kamal, Laila and Margo. Trauma gathers them together in one place at one time where they can sense the suffering of each other. Laila notices that Margo is detached from the world around her: "I long ago sensed Margo's detachment ... she manages to maintain a distance from the events and people she encounters" (Jarrar, 2010, p.440). Margo always carries the heavy secrets of the past and tries to avoid telling anyone about them. She keeps away from places and people who might remind her of her past. She has come to Beirut and has disconnected herself from those whom she has encountered in her past days, such as Patricia, Anna, and

John's family. She even has not told Laila and Kamal about them. Judith Herman (2014) asserts that

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, and community. They shatter the construction of self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order that cast the victim into a state of existential crises. (p.51)

Kamal has chosen a solitary occupation which is writing. He lives alone in an apartment and lacks relationships with people around him. He avoids contacting with anyone who might arouse the recollection of trauma, even his conversations with those who talk about wars cut into silence. "He is unwilling to delve further into despair with someone who would understand it too well" (Jarrar, 2010, p.122). It is clear that he does not want to give a space for any conversation that might remind him of his traumatic experience. He dives deeply into his past and his interior world. Therefore, he is so detached from the world around him. "He is unable to extricate himself from an eloquent interior world of his own making" (Ibid.). When Laila has come to Kamal to his apartment, he does not welcome her and closes the door immediately after her. Moreover, he senses his estrangement from his friends. He has asked himself "Where has the passion one? Swallowed up by the chasm of my own mind, I suppose" (Ibid., p.124).

Laila also feels alone and lost in this terrifying world. She looks for answers because the line between her past and present is foggy and bleary. Wars have crept into her mind and interrupted her existence. She lives in the dark and waits the light to ignite her hopeless world. Where is the light? No where!

There are other symptoms of PTSD. According to Lynn Margolis (2010), hyper arousal is one of the symptoms. Hyper arousal means that the traumatized person faces difficulties in sleeping and in concentrating. In addition, he can be easily startled. Irritability and anger are other symptoms (para, pp.3-5). All of the traumatized characters confront difficulty with sleeping. Kamal's thoughts prevent him from sleeping. He is restless and feels on the edge. Past days suffocate him and smother his soul. "There will be no sleep tonight, he knows, just the roaming and rambling of his fragile thoughts" (Jarrar, 2010, p.105).

Margo seems most of the time not concentrated and disassociated from reality. She goes outside with her slippers. In addition, she notices the ash that has been dropped from the cigarette in her lap. Then she pinches her thumb and middle fingers together to move it. After a while, she has discovered that the ash still in her lap and she has been "displacing nothing but the empty air" (Jarrar, 2010, p.168).

Margo stands on the threshold where she cannot move forward. She is inflicted with trauma and imprisoned by her thoughts. She fears everything, and she is helpless all

the time. All traumatized individuals are weak and unable to resist trauma. They are enveloped in darkness and fear.

Laila sees the disabled children who remind her of the inflicted victims of the civil war. War with all its cruelty and harshness does not know any kind of mercy. People become washed with blood. Mothers lose their children in front of their eyes where they are helpless and cannot do anything for them. Bombardments, killings, and bombings are everywhere. These memories reside in the unconsciousness of those who are traumatized. Laila has felt angry and nervous when she sees the disabled child where this scene has evoked the traumatic memories: "I nervously walked up to the young boy" (Jarrar, 2010, p.22). One source asserts that traumatized people can be easily startled by loud or sudden noises (Applebaum et al. p.229). Laila and Kamal have been walking during the night, and they have suddenly "startled" by the "sound" of loud cars.

Depression is one of the PTSD symptoms. Moreover, excessive using of alcohol and thinking of suicide and death are other symptoms. (Margolis, 2010, para.3-5). These symptoms are related strongly to Margo. She thinks that drinking alcohol might abate the misery of her situation. Fouad has found her lying on the floor: "There was a strong smell of alcohol on her breath and when she finally opened her eyes he could see they were bloodshot" (Jarrar, 2010, p.96).

Scrignar (1984) asserts that depression disorder includes lack of interest in work (p.90). Moreover, it decreases the effectiveness and productivity at work or home (p.140). Kamal has felt that he is no longer able to write. He cannot catch the pen to write and cannot gather his thoughts. He finds it so hard to go back to writing and "he does not have the heart for it" (Jarrar, 2010, p.116). Laila also lacks the pleasure in working, and she feels "a little enthusiasm for it" (Ibid., p.232).

CONCLUSION

Laila, Kamal and Margo cannot find their internal and external liberty. They are tormented psychologically and live in the darkness. They cannot find the path to light. Trauma smothers them and shatters their sense of identity. Wars, killings, bloodsheds, and bombardments leave scars on their hearts and their minds. They are not able to escape the effects of trauma. This is the time to say stop for wars, this is the time to appreciate humanity, and this is the time to think of other nations and to put down segregations. All people suffer from war effects despite their origin and religion. This is the time to sympathize with all victims. *A Good Land* portrays a world in which the events of 9/11 so fully repeal any representation of the self as a unified, strong or as having any grip or agency. In addition, *A Good Land* deconstructs all forms of order and stability and represents them as brittle grounds to which the individual and society hang precariously.

In conclusion, the research has argued that *A Good Land* seeks to articulate the reality of trauma thematically in spite of the difficulty of doing so. Drawing on concepts from trauma theory, specifically by Caruth and LaCapra, the study has argued that *A Good Land* could represent the main facets of trauma. In psychoanalytic terms, *A Good Land* can be regarded as a narrative of post-traumatic acting out. Acting-out is a kind of replicating repetition. Moreover, the study shows the effect of trauma on identity. The main symptoms of (PTSD), including belatedness, numbness, and avoidance have also been examined. The introduction of PTSD into literature is of course revolutionary. By depicting the lives of different traumatized characters and decorating the narrative with pain, misery, and agony, the novel is, for all its strengths, gleaming. I believe that *A Good Land* defies the cliché that trauma is unrepresentable. Indeed, it seems that the novel studied here has solved the crisis of articulating trauma. It has ignored the difficulty. Jarrar has managed to assimilate trauma into her text through the use of words that are not uttered and information that is not given.

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