



**Trauma and the Palestinian Experience in Betty Shamieh's  
*The Black Eyed* (2005)**

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**Abstract**

In recent times, there has been a significant surge of interest in the subject of 'trauma', which has emerged as a central theme connecting various academic disciplines. Consequently, the psychoanalytic concept of trauma intersects with literature, literary theory, historiography and contemporary culture. The objective of this paper is to apply trauma theory to several historical female figures in Palestine who have endured different traumatic experiences resulting from violence, terrorism, political manipulation, and cultural myths, with a particular focus on Betty Shamieh's play *The Black Eyed* (2005). This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that advocates for a more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma theory to better address feminist postcolonial perspectives on history, memory, and culture. In addition, it examines why trauma necessitates testimony and why testimony is one of the viable and vital responses to trauma. *The Black Eyed* sheds light on the oppression inflicted upon the Palestinian people throughout history, while also challenging prevalent cultural myths surrounding Arab-American women living in the United States, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. Through the portrayal of complex female characters, Shamieh asserts their individual identities through their traumatic experiences.

**Key words:** Betty Shamieh - cultural myths - history - Palestinian plight - postcolonial feminism - trauma.

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**Trauma and the Palestinian Experience in Betty Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* (2005)<sup>1</sup>**

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In recent times, there has been a significant surge of interest in the subject of 'trauma', which has emerged as a central theme connecting various academic disciplines. According to Irene Visser, trauma studies encompass a broad and diverse field that predates literary trauma studies by more than a century and includes trauma theory within the realms of literary and cultural studies. Since its inception in the 1990s, literary trauma theory has undergone constant modifications and redefinitions due to its inherent multidisciplinary nature and conceptual adaptability (2020: 304-5). Consequently, the psychoanalytic concept of trauma intersects with literature, literary theory, historiography, and contemporary culture.

In our modern era, characterized by terrorism and violence, the study of trauma theory has become essential. Many critics and intellectuals perceive the twenty-first century as a post-traumatic era due to the recent traumatic events worldwide. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja argue that global civilization has evolved in the past few decades to the extent that it is frequently described as traumatic or post-traumatic. The current reality of trauma is attributed to catastrophic events that have had a long-lasting cultural impact, such as the Holocaust, genocides in Armenia, Cambodia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Rwanda, as well as the Vietnam War, 9/11, the unresolved legacy of colonialism, and numerous other instances and sites of suffering (2020: 16).

The objective of this paper is to apply trauma theory to several historical female figures in Palestine who have endured different traumatic experiences resulting from violence, terrorism, political manipulation, and cultural myths, with a particular focus on Betty Shamieh's play *The Black Eyed* (2005). This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that advocates for a more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma theory to better address feminist postcolonial perspectives on history, memory, and culture. In addition, it examines why trauma necessitates testimony and why testimony is one of the viable and vital responses to trauma. *The Black Eyed* sheds light on the oppression inflicted upon the Palestinian people throughout history, while also challenging prevalent cultural myths surrounding Arab-American women living in the United States, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. Through the portrayal of complex female characters, Shamieh asserts their individual identities through their traumatic experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> هذا البحث قدم خارج إطار المنتدى العلمي الأول للمجلة الدولية لدراسات المرأة والطفل

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The political events of 9/11 prompted playwrights of Arab or Arab-American backgrounds to challenge misconceptions surrounding their culture and identity. Arab-American women playwrights recognized their responsibility to reclaim and reconstruct cultural and historical interpretations within their works. Betty Shamieh, a contemporary Palestinian-American playwright (born in 1979), endeavors to draw attention to the Palestinian dilemma in the Western world. Her primary concern lies in presenting dramas that depict cultural, historical, and political issues, which contribute to a deeper understanding of Palestinian women and Palestinian history. Through the framework of literary trauma theory, Shamieh engages her audience with intricate political postcolonial representations of the Palestinian people, offering her own perspective on Palestinian history by re-contextualizing her female characters within historical narratives. Her play *The Black Eyed*, written in free verse with a chorus, is a poetic and non-linear work that encompasses various political, historical, and biblical narratives, challenging the visibility of Palestinian female figures in a post-9/11 world.

To analyze Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* within the framework of trauma theory, it is important to explore the origins of the theory, its definition, and the ways in which its profound consequences can be addressed. The concept of trauma originated in medicine but found its way into the humanities during the 1990s through the pioneering work of the first wave of literary trauma theorists, including Geoffrey Hartman, Soshana Felman, and notably, Professor Cathy Caruth. In fact, Caruth coined the term 'Literary Trauma Theory,' which played a crucial role in conceptualizing what is now known as 'Trauma' in the realm of literature.

The term 'trauma' is derived from the Greek word for 'wound.' It can be defined as "a violent rupture in the social and psychological order that fundamentally alters an individual's concept of self and world" (Whitehead 2004: 4). This encompasses severe personal experiences such as the loss of a loved one or exposure to sexual violence. According to Caruth, in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized this long-neglected phenomenon as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD), which encompassed symptoms previously referred to as Shell-Shock, Combat Stress, Delayed Stress Syndrome, and Traumatic Neurosis, all of which pertained to responses to both human and natural catastrophes (1995: 3). Indeed, there are various responses and symptoms that are marked after exposure to a traumatic event, including recurring dreams, hallucinations, distressing thoughts and irrational behavior.

It is worth noting that the term 'trauma' does not solely refer to the traumatic

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experience itself, but rather encompasses the post-traumatic aftermath with its associated devastating consequences and symptoms. As Burstow explains, trauma is a reaction to a profound wound, a response to deeply injurious events and situations in the real world, within a society where people are routinely subjected to harm (2003: 1302). Therefore, understanding and addressing individuals' psycho-social issues should include an acknowledgment of the traumatizing socio-political circumstances they have encountered.

In her well-known book *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth defines 'Literary Trauma' as :

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. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our every actions and our language. (1995: 4)

Similarly, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman provide a simple explanation of the concept of 'trauma' as follows: Trauma has emerged as a fundamental signal of our time. It is how we often associate contemporary suffering with past violence. It is the imprint a catastrophic incident left on a specific victim, witness, or even culprit. It is also the product of a historical event that occurred decades, generations, or even centuries ago, leaving an impression on a group (2009: xi). This description focuses on one of Caruth's primary trauma notions, 'trans-historical trauma'. It claims that "traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable, but it is also literal, contagious, and mummified event" (Balaev 2008:151). Caruth argues that "the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will" (1996:2).

Caruth goes on to say that trauma "is never simply one's own [but] precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (1996:24), implying that trauma is contagious. Caruth, among other literary critics, argues that traumatic occurrences can be transferred across generations through oral or written actions. Kirby Farrell finds that any traumatic event can be shared among people depending on social criteria such as ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, resulting in the formation of a "post-traumatic culture" (1998:3).

Michelle Balaev defines 'trans-historical trauma' precisely as follows: Because of the timeless, repeatable, and contagious nature of traumatic experience and memory, a massive trauma experienced by a group in the past can be relieved by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar

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characteristic of the group, such as race, religion, nationality, or gender (2008:152). As a result, trauma narratives have the potential to reproduce the terrible experience for people who were previously excluded. This is the reason why a particular community can shape its cultural identity through shared history. This trans-historical condition can be gradually felt and realized while analyzing Shamieh's play *The Black Eyed*.

However, the theory of trans-historical trauma confines the meaning of trauma in literature because it confuses the distinctions between 'personal loss' actually experienced by an individual and a 'historical absence' found in one's ancestral lineage. On the one hand, personal loss can be interpreted as the lived traumatic experience of an event by one person. On the other hand, historical absence can be inferred as a historically documented loss that was experienced by an individual's ancestors. Dominick LaCapra, the well-known Historian, explains clearly the difference between loss and absence when he mentions that people face "particular losses in distinct ways" which is quite the opposite of a historical absence of experience that was never there in the first place and, thus, cannot be experienced as a lack or loss (2001:700). In fact, trans-historical or intergenerational trauma collapses boundaries between the individual and group, and at the same time, blurs the distinction between loss and absence. As a result, both victim and perpetrator maintain similar relationships to a traumatic experience and, hence, feel the same responses.

Balaev emphasizes that the traumatized figure puts to light the unique aspect of individual trauma, which is frequently linked to larger social and cultural beliefs. Trauma literature gives an image of the individual who suffers, but it is presented in such a way that this character is representative of 'every human'. Balaev adds that one of the protagonist's key areas of concentration is often a historical period in which a group of people or a specific culture, race, or gender faced widespread pain. The fictitious figure exaggerates a real-life episode in which thousands or millions of people were subjected to comparable atrocities (2008:155).

Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* is a striking example of the application of trauma theory, which is used as a powerful indicator of oppressive political and cultural regimes and practices. Shamieh's play also includes references to emotional or psychological suffering, as well as political or societal trauma. Deborah Horvitz defines psychological trauma as "sodomasochistic violence against a designated victim, who is personally known by [his] assailant" (2000:11), while cultural trauma is "an officially sanctioned, sodomasochistic system of oppression in which a targeted group, perceived by the dominant culture as an obstacle to the

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goals of the existing hegemony, are tortured, imprisoned, or killed" (2000:11).

According to Jeffrey Alexander, cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity witness a horrific incident that leaves indelible scars on their collective consciousness, altering their memories and radically transforming their future identity (2004:1). He goes on to say that traumas are "constructed by society" rather than occurring spontaneously (2004:2). Furthermore, Arthur Neal explains that communal traumas, with national and cultural traumas as subcategories, have an "explosive quality... creating disruption and radical change within a short period of time" (1998:9-10). Kai Erikson completely outlines the distinction between individual and collective traumas: Individual trauma is a psychological hit that penetrates one's defenses in such a sudden and forceful manner that one is unable to respond properly. On the other hand, collective trauma stands for a blow to the fundamental social fabric that weakens the ties tying people together and undermines the pervasive sense of community. Moreover, collective trauma lacks the suddenness typically associated with 'trauma', instead, creeping slowly and even sneakily into the consciousness of those affected. Even so, it is a gradual realization that the community is no longer a reliable source of support and that a significant portion of the self has disappeared (1978:153-4).

In addition to these two, there is a third category known as 'insidious trauma'. Olu Jenzen defines it as the interpretation of everyday repressive encounters as traumatic events (2010:4). He believes that forms of insidious trauma include "living in severe poverty, or the impact of racism, colonialism, and homophobia" (2010:4). As a result, Palestinian history under Israeli occupation is viewed as a paradigm of political or cultural pain. With its compounded forms of brutality and oppression, Israel's occupation of Palestine is a stark example of insidious trauma.

Indeed, Shamieh uses memory to return to the situations that caused the trauma. Like other Palestinians, she must deal with her people's pain, which permeates every area of their public and private lives. Her play *The Black Eyed* reflects her awareness of the profound impact of trauma on individuals and society. Her primary aim, as with all her people, is to liberate and restore her ancestors' land. Edward Said confirms this notion, stating that "the insistence on the right to see the community's history whole... restore the imprisoned nation to itself" (1994:259). Lucian Pye adds that "political culture is shaped on the one hand by the general historical experience of the society or system and on the other hand by the intensely private and personal experiences of the individuals as they become members of first the society and then the polity" (1962:121).

The title of the play, *The Black Eyed*, challenges the stereotypical image of the Arab woman who is distinguished by black eyes. This title also refers to the Houris, in the Arabic language, that means beautiful virgin young girls who are given as rewards for Muslim martyrs in Heaven. The play delves into the afterlife of four Palestinian female characters. In Paradise, they are waiting to meet the martyrs who are locked in a room that no one has the courage to enter. Each of these women is a symbolic historical figure. The stories they relate trace the Palestinian history and the plight of the Palestinian People, starting with Delilah who lived before the monotheistic religions, then Tamam who lived during the Crusades era, moving forward to the contemporary Islamic Aisha, and finally the postmodern Palestinian-American Architect. Each of these women struggles through a certain period of time, representing the exploitation of Palestine itself through history by relating their devastating traumatic experiences. The play begins with Aiesha, alone on stage, saying:

Unanswered questions,

Unquestioned  
answers...

What is the point of the revolution that begins with the little  
hand? ...

Unanswered  
questions,

Unquestioned answers...  
(Shamieh2005:1)

Shamieh begins her play with questions that stimulate her readers' mind to think while hearing the stories of her female characters. She is stating her main concern very clearly and very early in order to give her readers or audience the chance to live with her characters and think about the answer. Shamieh skillfully expands her perspective to question the price of suffering from trauma through four different Palestinian historical eras. She implies that it is one related history: the past leads to the present and it will lead to the future. Throughout the play, her characters relive the Palestinian trauma of violence, displacement, sexual abuse and oppression. Shamieh excels in mingling both personal and cultural traumas in her play because each of her female characters is a symbolic figure who stands for her community. She writes as an Arab-American voice that reflects on her Palestinian heritage and the traumatic effects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Delilah is the first to speak. She is a biblical figure whose story with Samson was related in the Bible. She is a beautiful Palestinian girl whose brother was killed by Samson, the strongest Israeli man, who killed hundreds of Palestinians daily. The men in her tribe manipulated Delilah to seduce Samson so as to discover the secret of his power:

DELILAH

They made me think it was my idea.  
They asked me to take my father's place at their meetings,  
even though I was a girl,  
because my only brother was dead.  
We talked of many things.  
They listened as if my opinions mattered,  
As if I mattered. (Shamieh 2005:13)

Shamieh, in spite of being Palestinian, is very objective in portraying her people as abusing Delilah. When she finished her mission, they treated her as a whore:

DELILAH

My people called me a whore.  
I overheard a young man from my own clay say:  
The whore did her job and she did it well.  
He did not call me the daughter of an honorable man,  
or a good woman who loved her people. (Shamieh 2005:13)

As a result, Delilah suffers from both personal and political traumas as she was obliged to practice prostitution by her people in their political war. She agreed to avenge Samson because he killed her brother with hundreds of men from her people. She has played a vital role in reshaping the history of her tribe, not as a wife or as a mother, but as a political weapon to destroy the colonizer. The details of Delilah's story express the complex nature of her trauma as a result of the oppression of the colonizer and the treachery of her tribe.

In fact, the whole story of Delilah and Samson is narrated by Shamieh in order to draw the global attention to the origin of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis that led to bloodshed from that early period. Consequently, highlighting the history of both the Palestinian people and



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Israelis is meant, by Shamieh, to be closely related to the oppression and bloodshed taking place in Palestine nowadays.

Tamam, speaking second, belongs to the era of the Crusades of the Middle Ages. She is a beautiful girl whose brother was put in jail because he joined resistance groups against the crusaders. She went to free her brother but the soldiers raped her in front of his eyes. Tamam describes her feelings along with her brother's during the rape; the Crusaders want to destroy the Palestinians but they were used to torture and misery like anything else:

TAMAM

When the first hand was laid upon me, we both screamed....

My brother tried to look every other way,

but realized I needed him,

to look me in the eyes

(pause) and understand.

They thought making us face one another

in our misery would break us.

But we were used to misery.

It's like anything else. (Shamieh 2005:40)

Tamam, like Delilah, suffers from both personal and political traumas. It was well known throughout history that the 200-year 'Holy Wars' by the Western Crusaders against the Arabs and Islam were so bloody, genocidal and barbaric. Tamam summarizes the results of oppression through her brother's words: "Oppression is like a coin maker. You put in human beings, press the right buttons and watch them get squeezed, shrunk, flattened till they take the slim shape of a two-faced coin" (Shamieh 2005:41). In fact, Tamam was raped in front of her brother in order to humiliate and subjugate him. The Crusaders burnt her village and killed her brother. Recalling the massacre, she states:

TAMAM

The Crusader mourners pulled the one hand...out of mine.

They smeared it and his head with pig fat,

as they did to desecrate the bodies of our soldiers.

They hung my brother's head and hand with them  
on pikes above the city walls. (Shamieh 2005:41)

Through the painful story of Tamam, it is crystal clear that it is not the Palestinian people who invaded the West and usurped their land. On the contrary, the Europeans had launched a war against them and had attacked their homeland, using religion as a mask to hide their real intentions. As a matter of fact, Palestine is the 'Holy Land' according to the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This tiny spot has witnessed countless conflicts and struggles throughout history. It has been attacked and manipulated by several nations.

Moving towards the modern age, the story of the Palestinian oppression is continued by Aeisha who belongs to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, Palestine is still suffering due to the Arab-Israeli conflict as it is actually the most perplexing dimension of the recent history of the area. Israelis and Palestinians engage in a restless, seemingly out of control cycle of terrorist attacks, suicide bombing and brutal assassinations. Aeisha is the first woman to explode herself in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. She is one of endless victims of the violence of the Israeli occupation to Palestine. She seeks rebellion as she has seen her brother killed by the Israelis like Tamam. She declares that millions of women have suffered all over history as Tamam:

#### AEISHA

You could start by acknowledging your story is not unique.

You were raped and lost a brother to war.

That happened to millions of women throughout history.

In fact, the Crusades were nothing compared to the Palestinian and Israeli wars I lived through. (Shamieh 2005:45)

It is obvious that the Israeli occupation increases the level of violence, hatred and oppression in the Palestinian society. Aeisha, a symbolic figure that stands for the oppression of the Israeli occupation, decides to revenge by becoming a suicide bomber. She actually plays the same role of Tamam's brother in the earlier story. Aeisha's struggle is that of many modern Palestinian women who suffer from both psychological and political traumas as a result of the oppressive policies of the Israeli occupation. They are exposed to all types

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of violence such as beating, cursing, house demolitions, and difficulty of accessing health centres, forcing them to deliver their babies at checkpoints and being subjected to verbal or sexual assault.

The Architect, the last to speak, is a nameless modern woman who belongs to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She is only identified as the Architect, a neurotic woman who has fantasies about marrying her boss and who then dies in a plane hijack. She is a Palestinian-American who lives in America and adheres to her Arabic heritage, experiencing both personal and cultural traumas. She suffers from lack of assimilation inside the American society as she is unable to make the balance between her Arabic customs and traditions and the freedom of the American society with its Western culture. As a result, she escapes, from a world she cannot live in, into a world of her imagination, and loses her living soul into a world of fantasy and daydreaming:

#### ARCHITECT

I'm the Architect of unseen structures  
and buildings that will never be built.

I am the mother of children who will never be born,

#### CHORUS (DELILAH, TAMAM)

The lover of men who will remain unloved. (Shamieh 2005:49)

Through the character of the Architect, Shamieh highlights the concept of hybrid identity of Arab-Americans in general, since they are lost between two cultures. At the same time, they cannot ignore their attachment to both cultures, yet they belong to a minority that is marginalized in society. The problem of the Architect is that of many Arab-Americans who are incapable of defining their true national identity as they actually suffer from ethnic discrimination as well as diaspora. Consequently, the Architect struggles to find a place for herself that truly accepts her. Unfortunately, she discovered that only, through her world of fantasy, she can achieve all her dreams. In fact, Shamieh's beliefs coincide with Edward Said's words when he stated that : “ the web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed, and it is this web which every Palestinian has come to feel as his uniquely punishing destiny”( Said 1994:27).

Returning to the principles of trauma theory, M. Jan Holton and Jill L. Snodgrass emphasize the importance of redefining and reimagining our

understanding of trauma. They argue that theories and theological perspectives must be put into practice in order to foster resistance and the potential for transformation (2023). In the view of Caruth, trauma represents an intense experience that the mind struggles to process in a typical manner. In the immediate aftermath of trauma, the affected individual may be unable to recollect the painful event. If traumatic memories do emerge, they often take on a non-verbal nature, making it difficult for the individual to articulate them in words. However, Caruth suggests that works of figurative and imaginative literature have the ability to convey the essence of trauma, whereas direct verbal language falls short in this regard. Pederson further asserts that Caruth's theory highlights the testimonial power of literature in giving a voice to individuals and communities affected by trauma (2014:334).

While Caruth's description of trauma shows her indebtedness to Freud, she builds her literary theory of trauma on the findings of contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists, particularly Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk. Their research aligns with Caruth's belief that trauma is characterized by amnesia and an inability to articulate it. Caruth's theory has remained resilient to criticism due to its foundation on scientific evidence, which lends it lasting value. Van der Kolk, for instance, supports the idea of traumatic amnesia by drawing from Pierre Janet's observation that the brain resists registering traumatic events. During times of threat, an individual's consciousness narrows, focusing only on central details, and this narrowing sometimes leads to a complete amnesia of the experience during the traumatization process (1996:285).

Van der Kolk's and Herman's works also provide support for Caruth's assertion that trauma is inexpressible. Caruth explores this aspect through her discussion of Freud in her book *Unclaimed Experience*, building on Herman's observations in her book *Trauma and Recovery*. Herman describes the challenges faced by victims when they are encouraged to confront their traumatic experiences in therapy: as the narrative approaches the most unbearable moments, patients increasingly struggle to find words to convey their experiences and may resort to non-verbal forms of communication, such as drawing or painting (1992:177). Caruth maintains that trauma victims are unable to verbally articulate their traumas.

However, more recent studies in the field of trauma psychology have challenged Caruth's claims. Richard McNally's book *Remembering Trauma* presents extensive research that debunks the notion of traumatic amnesia and argues that traumatized individuals are capable of speaking about their traumatic experiences (2010:334). McNally asserts that van der Kolk's claim

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about stress hormones impairing memory for trauma lacks support from neuroscience research (2003:180). McNally believes that victims may not frequently dwell on their traumatic experiences, but the absence of active thought does not equate to amnesia. Amnesia refers to the inability to recall encoded information, and it is incorrect to assume that people cannot remember abuse from years ago simply because they did not actively think about it (2003:184).

McNally also challenges the idea that some victims have completely forgotten the details of their abuse. He argues that researchers have been unable to substantiate claims made by certain victims regarding their abuse experiences. McNally suggests that the social pressure to recall abuse memories may lead to the formulation of false memories of events that never occurred (2003:200). While McNally acknowledges the reality of abuse, he doubts the possibility of total amnesia regarding one's own abuse. He contends that it is impossible to prove that certain information is not available in an individual's memory (2003:184).

In summary, McNally's research indicates that amnesia cannot be inferred solely from a victim's desire to avoid thinking about a painful experience. Moreover, he presents evidence suggesting that traumatic memories are both memorable and expressible. According to Susan Brison, trauma survivors have the ability to remember and recount their traumatic past, and sharing their experiences through narrative holds a healing power (2002:71). McNally concludes that emotional stress enhances memory for the central aspects of a stressful experience, contradicting the notion that stress impairs memory (2003:62). He adds that traumatic memories have the potential to be more powerful and detailed than ordinary memories, potentially explaining why authors may depict traumatic experiences with heightened intensity and detail (2003:182). Ultimately, McNally's research challenges Caruth's theory of trauma, leading to ongoing critical reassessment.

According to Henson et al., there are various factors that contribute to post-traumatic growth (PTG), including sharing negative emotions, engaging in intellectual processing, using positive coping strategies, possessing certain personality traits, experiencing multiple sources of trauma, and taking actions towards personal growth (2021). In *The Black Eyed* by Shamieh, the four women characters symbolically represent individuals who are still affected by their traumatic experiences. Delilah seeks Samson, Tamam searches for her brother, Aiesha desires to enter, and the Architect wants to meet her plane hijacker. These characters' stories delve into the depths of the human psyche

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and aim to uncover the reasons behind their traumas, serving as a step towards healing.

One way to break free from the confines of one's own psyche is to share one's story and construct a narrative, as it allows the painful events to be externalized and initiates a therapeutic process. Shamieh expands her readers' awareness of trauma in *The Black Eyed* by involving them in different historical narratives, highlighting the complex and conflicting nature of traumatic memory. Through personal contexts and testimonial elements, she seeks to reshape cultural memory and shed light on overlooked historical catastrophes, particularly focusing on the Palestinian experience, which heavily relies on oral history rather than documented evidence.

Narrating one's traumatic experience is a crucial step in the healing process, as survivors, according to Dori Laub, not only need to survive in order to tell their stories but also need to tell their stories to facilitate their own survival (1992:78). Bearing witness to trauma serves to fill gaps in memory and overcome resistance caused by repression, as described by Freud (1914:148). Horvitz asserts that bearing witness also acts as a form of resistance against cultural repression and a means of collective therapy, bringing trauma victims together (2000:2). In addition, Zelizer suggests that bearing witness helps individuals overcome the difficulties associated with trauma and transforms it from a personal experience to a collective process of recovery (2002:2). It possesses significant healing power for traumatized individuals. In *The Black Eyed*, Shamieh employs bearing witness as a tool of resistance and a means to document Palestinian history. She exposes the consequences of personal and cultural trauma on the psyche, aiming to dismantle social repression and restore collective psychological well-being by reclaiming memory. Bearing witness, in Shamieh's play, is not only an act of narration but also a commitment to truthfully recounting history for the sake of others.

In *The Black Eyed*, Delilah pays the price of being traumatized by both her people and Samson. According to the Bible, she died with all her tribe and Samson himself. Now, in the afterlife, she is being healed from her trauma by confessing in front of the other women that she regrets cheating Samson because she discovered that she loved him. She looks for him in the martyr's room. Delilah says, "I don't care. I want to see Samson. I'm sure they'll welcome me in the martyr's room when they know how much I love him" (Shamieh 2005:24). She is actually looking for him in order to ask him for forgiveness. Even in the afterlife, Delilah is torn between her duty towards her people and her love for Samson. Aisha asks her: "So why don't you join the Jewish women, Delilah?" (Shamieh 2005:24). Delilah refuses this because she

believes that her love for Samson cannot take her away from the love of her country. In fact, Palestine is part of Delilah's identity, the same as it is part of Shamieh cultural identity.

As for Tamam, she started her process of healing by searching for her brother in the martyr's room, too. She has the opportunity to have revenge over her rapists but she refuses as she wants them to live in continuous pain and regret:

#### TAMAM

I've been in heaven for over hundreds of years.  
I have seen every person, even the guards who raped me.  
who apologized profusely,...  
and I was allowed to cut off their genitals.  
But I chose not to and said I'll be back to do it later,  
Because I didn't want to hurt them once and be done with it.  
I wanted them to fear me forever. (Shamieh 2005:48)

In fact, Tamam represents the image of Palestine that had been raped by the Crusades during that period of time as Palestine is miserable, used, abused and attacked from time to time.

As for Aiesha, her character is confusing. She is representative of some Arabs who are misled due to their fanatic ideology and false religious beliefs. Her struggle is that of many Arabs who are lost and cannot choose the righteous way for their rebellion. They believe themselves to be martyrs even if they kill innocent people. Islam is misunderstood by those people for it is a religion that "orders tolerance, moderation, balance, and harmony under all circumstances – so much so that the massacre of peaceful people is strictly prohibited even in times of war" (Tahir-ul-Qadri 2010:120). Aiesha, in the afterlife, narrates her story to the other characters, as a means of healing from her trauma:

#### AEISHA

I am a martyr.  
There are female martyrs too, you know.  
I built something more intricate than the human heart,

Hugged it to my chest,  
And walked into the biggest crowd I could find. (Shamieh  
2005:40)

Aiesha turns to be a murderer as a result of being traumatized by the oppression of the Palestinian-Israeli struggle. According to her limited understanding of religion, she considers herself to be a virgin martyr and she will gain more men in the afterlife as a reward like martyr men who are rewarded 'houris':

AEISHA

I interpreted that to mean that if I blew myself  
up and took others with me,  
because no one would give a shit about my people's  
plight unless I did,  
I would have a hundred men of every hue,  
who were lined up like fruits at the market. (Shamieh 2005:42)

In fact, Shamieh is criticizing Aeisha. She is not a true rebellious woman, as rebellion cannot be associated with killing innocent people. Through her, Shamieh wants to prove that terrorism is not linked to Islam or to any other religion. Another reason behind delineating the character of Aeisha might be that Shamieh is living in the United States where Media presents Palestinians as terrorists rather than rebels. She actually accuses the American government of all the terror practiced upon Arabs. She tries to prove that any act of terror practiced by an Arab is used as a weapon to prove that Arabs are terrorists. Shamieh intentionally wants to shed light on the roots of terrorism in both sides of the world: the East and the West.

As for the Architect, she narrates her traumatizing experience to the other women, a step towards her healing process. After remaining a virgin till the age of thirty five, she decided to assimilate into the American society: She phoned her half breed boss telling him that she wished to meet him urgently. He asked her to take the first flight. She was determined to give up her Arabic and Islamic heritage. While sitting in the airport waiting for her flight, she imagined that her plane was hijacked and she talked to the hijackers who turned out to be Arabs. Their conversation reflected the spirit of the 9/11 attacks. The Architect addresses the American community: "So what if the American government supports corrupt leaders in our countries and then kills hundreds of thousands of Arabs when those leaders don't do" (Shamieh 2005:66), shedding light on the



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American government that supports corrupt Arab leaders who too have helped in increasing the oppression and exploitation of their people instead of supporting them.

The Architect's fantasies turned out to be true during the real flight. In fact, Arabs hijacked her plane. She recognized them from her mother-tongue language. She tried to talk to the hijackers but they refused. They exploded the plane and she died with other Arabs and Americans. Now, the Architect gives her reasons to the other women who are waiting in front of the martyr's room:

ARCHITECT

I'm here to find the man who passed me  
and knew I was an Arab.  
I know that I could have stopped him  
before he did what he did if I had the right words.  
The man who killed me is the only one who can tell me,  
I'm here to ask him. (Shamieh 2005:70)

In fact, the Architect is in search of a reasonable justification. She announces the motives behind the outrage of the Arab hijackers as she imagines a time when:

ARCHITECT

In fact, they'll refuse to get off the plane,  
Until Palestinians are allowed the right to self-determination,  
Iraqis are not killed so their oil can be stolen,  
The people on the plane don't buy the crap  
the American government tries to sell us  
about trying to secure human rights ...

CHORUS (DELILAH, TAMAM)

Having the gall to use human rights

ARCHITECT

as an excuse to bomb those human beings  
While being allies. (Shamieh 2005:68)

As a matter of fact, Shamieh declares her own point of view through the character of the Architect. She rejects the policy of the US against Arabs in general and against the Palestinian people in particular. She tries to grab the attention of the American people in order to urge them to stop the exploitation of their government to the Arab countries. The American government is hypocritical in that they call for peace and human rights while they are practicing oppression and exploitation over different nations as Palestine and Iraq. Under the motto of 'Human Rights,' the American government interferes in the affairs of all Arab countries in order to have full control over the wealth and land of the Middle East.

In the contemporary age, the literary theory of trauma has been utilized in the analysis of the literary works of postcolonial fiction. Anne Whitehead contends that trauma fiction intersects with postcolonial fiction "in its concern with the recovery of memory and the acknowledgement of the denied, the repressed and the forgotten" (2004:82). Shamieh's *The Black Eyed* is a typical example of postcolonial fiction that reflects core concepts of postcolonial feminism. The female voices in the play represent an active perspective of postcolonial feminism. In their stories, they question the social injustices of their communities instead of identifying themselves with traditional maternal roles. Western feminism has never paid attention to the differences of class, race and feelings of colonized women. In fact, postcolonial feminism is totally against Western feminism because of its sheer 'eurocentrism'. The Western tendency to homogenize and generalize the experiences of colonized women led to the rise of 'postcolonial feminism'.

In *The Black Eyed*, the four female figures fight the stereotypical image of Western ideologies about Eastern women. They are portrayed as victims of patriarchal hegemony, mutilation, Arab familial system or victims of the Islamic code. In her play, Shamieh stands against this universality and challenges the Western perspective of Eastern women. Four females lost their lives as a result of their dynamic participation in political confrontations against the colonizer.

As for Delilah, patriarchal hegemony is the source of her trauma. She was exploited by her people to defeat Samson. Delilah is a symbol for the exploitation of Palestine since a long period of time. Through the story of Delilah and Samson, Shamieh wants to trace back the origin of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. It caused a lot of violence and bloodshed in the past. Hence, throwing light on the history of both Palestinians and Israelis is meant to be linked to the struggle and bloodshed that takes place today in Palestine.

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Tamam also suffers from trauma as a result of her Arab familial system. She describes how her family prefers boys over girls. Her name means 'enough' in Arabic. She says, "I am the last of seven sisters, good luck for the family. Because, after me, a brother was born. The only one" (Shamieh 2005:37). Then the Chorus comments: "Why do our people rejoice when a boy child is born?" (Shamieh 2005:37). In fact, Shamieh rejects all forms of discrimination against women such as neglect, better feeding of boys than girls and less education for girls than boys.

As for the Architect, she represents the postcolonial female figure who is unable to assimilate inside the American society. As an Arab-American herself, Shamieh provides an insightful understanding for Americans into the mind of Arab women living among them with their Arabic heritage. In fact, the Architect suffers from both psychological and cultural traumas as a result of an identity crisis due to her inability to assimilate inside her adopted country as an American citizen. However, she is unable to live fully either as an American or an Arab. In the end, she died by the hands of Arabs.

In her world of fantasy, the Architect imagined a whole life that she could not live in reality: she loved, got married, had kids, felt jealous and finally suffered from her husband's death. Through the Architect's narrative, Shamieh touches upon the dilemma of second-generation Arab-Americans. They live torn between two opposing cultures. All the time, they bear the responsibility to explain and justify the gaps between their home culture and the host culture. Hence, through the character of the Architect, Shamieh attempts to make the voice of postcolonial Arab-American women be heard and noticed by the West.

Moreover, the Architect is Shamieh's voice who addresses the American people after 9/11. She declares that the history of prejudice and violence towards Arab countries becomes a fertile soil for terrorism to grow and flourish. The basic cause behind the rise of Islamic terrorism is the long series of Western Colonialism to the Middle East: The Israeli occupation to Palestine, the Storm of Desert against Iraq, the Crusade against Terrorism in Afghanistan, the plight of Syria, Yemen and several Arab countries.

However, Shamieh and other Arabs do not believe that the resolution lies in killing innocent people. She is actually against the policy of both parties:

**ARCHITECT**

All that still doesn't make it right to kill.

I would say to them – You're hijacking this plane full of people who are ignorant, who are looking at you and saying what kind of people could do such violent, cruel things?

.....

ARCHITECT

They don't know that it's the kind of people

The American government has been doing

Just as violent, cruel things to

in its people's name for generations.

May be they don't care.

But they're not worth killing yourself over.

They call us terrorists. (Shamieh 2005:65)

Towards the end of the play, the four women begin to ask the unanswered questions and try to find out about the unquestioned answers that Shamieh started her play with:

DELILAH

Isn't the only way we can assure we're never oppressed is to oppress other people?

ARCHITECT

Wouldn't they do the same to us the minute they had the chance?

CHORUS (DELILAH, TAMAM, ARCHITECT)

Why is violence only wrong when we use it?

CHORUS (ALL FOUR WOMEN)

Isn't violence the only thing these people understand? (Shamieh 2005:82)

As a result, Shamieh excels at justifying her goal of composing her play *The Black Eyed*, which she described previously. She cleverly turns these inquiries towards America and the Arab world. She continually professes her rejection of violence and injustice, claiming that murdering each other is futile. Instead, it exacerbates the condition. It gets increasingly catastrophic and traumatizing.

She believes that the never-ending Palestinian-Israeli conflict cannot be addressed via violence and death. Millions of innocent individuals die in pointless, never-ending conflicts. The methods of violence and tyranny may change throughout history, but the horrific agony and memories they cause remain constant. It is understandable that Shamieh does not support Palestine, her mother nation. She truly wants her message to reach those who support or oppose Israel. She hopes for a peaceful solution that will put an end to discrimination and terror against both her mother country and ethnic minorities like herself in the United States. Shamieh also hopes that one day Palestine will live in peace.

In conclusion, Shamieh's poetic play *The Black Eyed* is regarded as her most intricate and vivid work. It successfully distinguishes four Palestinian women from various historical periods who are anticipating their fate in the afterlife. This research paper looks at how Betty Shamieh applies the theory of literary trauma to four female historical figures who have had traumatic experiences as a result of being subjected to various forms of violence, terrorism, and oppression throughout Palestinian history. Through her play *The Black Eyed*, Shamieh attempts to heal herself and her people from both personal and cultural wounds by using the power of testimony and the therapeutic practice of 'bearing witness'. She utilizes narrative memory as a means of resistance against the endless trials of the Israeli regime to erase the Palestinian history. In fact, Shamieh challenges the cultural myth of the 'black eyed' virgins throughout her play and reverses traditional power dynamics. In Shamieh's world, rules are reversed. Her women possess power, choice and dissent, thus asserting their individual identities in a postcolonial feminist context. Although each character has its own distinct point of view, Shamieh includes moments of overlapping, repetition and prayer-like chants. These female figures speak together as if reciting a prayer. They continuously function as one unity and speak collectively and cohesively as a chorus, thus contributing into the collective healing process from their traumatizing experiences. This study also sheds light on the cultural trauma facing Arab-Americans post 9/11 and their inability to assimilate into the Western culture.

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