



The Psychological Scars of Everyday Life in Gaza

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Abstract

Gaza Writes Back, a collection of short stories by Palestinian youths, depicts the deep psychological scars inflicted by ongoing conflict and war trauma. Through compelling narratives set against the harsh realities of daily life in Gaza, the collection highlights the profound impact of violence, displacement, and loss—particularly on children. This study examines how these stories serve as windows into the emotional and psychological struggles of Palestinians, revealing their resilience and suppressed emotions. Employing Freud's psychoanalytic framework, this research aims to analyze how trauma manifests in the unconscious mind of the characters, shaping their perceptions and behaviors in a war-torn landscape.

Keywords: war trauma, unconscious mind, lived experience, repression, psychoanalysis, survivor's guilt

Introduction

War and violence have long-lasting effects and leave psychological scars on individuals living in conflict zones. Children are the most affected, and those in their formative years are disrupted by trauma, loss, and fear. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Gaza



Strip has become one of the most volatile and harrowing environments in the contemporary world. Constant exposure to violence has created a unique psychological landscape for children in Gaza, whose lives are marked by an intersection of ordinary experiences and extraordinary suffering. The collection of short stories, *Gaza Writes Back*, authored by young Palestinian writers, captures the experiences of individuals surviving under such conditions. It brings to the forefront the voices of the voiceless, particularly children, who carry the psychological burden of war in their everyday lives. The stories reflect not only the external realities of destruction, but also the internal battles of individuals grappling with loss, trauma, and the fragmented nature of their worlds. The concept of the “everyday” (29), as theorized by Henri Lefebvre, provides a valuable framework for understanding how trauma manifests in mundane life. In *Critique of Everyday Life*, he affirms that “Problems of everyday life and studies of everyday life have become increasingly important in the minds of historians, ethnographers, philosophers, sociologists, as well as of writers, artists and journalists” (29). Michel de Certeau has also theorized the same in his *The Practice of Everyday Life*. The literature serves as a lens through which the complexities of human existence are explored, revealing deeper psychological, cultural, and social truths. Highmore states, “Everyday life is not simply the name that is given to a reality readily available for scrutiny; it is also the name for aspects of life that lie hidden. To invoke an ordinary culture from below is to make the invisible visible, and as such has clear social and political reasons” (1-2). In Gaza, everyday life is laden with the residue of violence, which makes ordinary life inseparable from extraordinary events. The characters in these stories, particularly children, navigate everyday existence shaped by fear, loss, and repressed trauma.

Aim of the study



This paper aims to delve into the psychological dimensions of three selected stories from *Gaza Writes Back* namely, “L for Life” by Hanan Habashi, “Spared” by Rawan Yaghi, and “Please Shoot to Kill” by Jehan Alfarra. Through the lens of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, the analysis focuses on characters’ unconscious minds and repressed emotions, examining how their past traumatic experiences have shaped their thoughts, behaviors, and interactions with their surroundings. Freud’s concepts of the “unconscious” (396), “repression” (396) and repetition “compulsion” (125) are key concepts in understanding the profound psychological impact of war on the children in these narratives. The paper also contextualizes the stories within the broader socio-political landscape of Gaza, particularly in the aftermath of Operation Cast Lead (2008–2009). This three-week conflict resulted in a significant loss of life, destruction of infrastructure, and lasting psychological trauma for Palestinians, particularly children. Against this backdrop, the stories seem to serve as poignant reminders of the resilience of the human spirit amid adversity. By analyzing these narratives, this paper seeks to illuminate the intricate ways in which trauma reshapes the lives of children in Gaza, offering a deeper understanding of their inner worlds and the broader implications of growing up in a conflict zone. In doing so, it highlights the importance of acknowledging and addressing the psychological consequences of war, particularly for those who are often invisible in global discourses on conflict.

Review of Literature

The psychological impact of war has been a focal point for researchers across disciplines, offering insight into the multifaceted nature of trauma and its effects on individuals and societies.



This review synthesizes key findings from studies on war-induced trauma and examines their relevance to the study of trauma narratives.

Laufer, Gallops and Frey-Wouters in “War Stress and Trauma: The Vietnam Veteran Experience” (1984) present a model of war trauma through combat experience, witnessing abusive violence, and participation in abusive violence. Their hierarchical regression analysis of Vietnamese veterans revealed that each component distinctly affects psychological outcomes. This article deals with racial disparities, showing that exposure to abusive violence impacts Black and White veterans differently. These findings reveal the importance of understanding how specific traumatic experiences shape psychological states, and emphasize the need for culturally and contextually aware interpretations of trauma. Peters’ *Trauma Narratives of the English Civil War* (2013) explored the psychological and cultural consequences of the English Civil War through personal and collective trauma narratives. By identifying symptoms analogous to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and shell shock in seventeenth-century accounts, Peters illustrates how early modern societies grappled with the psychological aftermath of the war. This study also emphasizes the therapeutic potential of trauma narration and its role in integrating individual suffering into broader cultural frameworks. This perspective highlights the dual function of trauma narratives as tools for individual psychological relief and as mechanisms for constructing collective memory. Macksoud and Aber’s “The War Experiences and Psychosocial Development of Children in Lebanon” (1996) investigates the war experiences of children in Lebanon. It analyses the psychosocial effects of trauma in a war-torn environment. Their study identifies meaningful variations in the number and types of trauma experienced by children, influenced by factors such as age, gender, and parental socio-economic status. They



have found that specific war traumas correlate with PTSD symptoms and adaptive behaviors, revealing that children often display resilience through prosocial behavior, even amid adversity. This study emphasizes the complexity of childhood responses to trauma, and the need for tailored interventions. Together, these studies emphasize the diverse impacts of war trauma across different populations. Laufer and his co-authors highlight the intricate psychological consequences for combatants, Peters contextualizes trauma within a historical and cultural framework, where as Macksoud and Aber provide valuable insights into the developmental challenges faced by children in conflict zones. Collectively, they highlight the importance of multidimensional approaches for understanding and addressing the psychological aftermath of war, considering both individual experiences and broader social and cultural contexts. While the existing literature often adopts either a psychological or cultural perspective, there is limited integration of everyday theory and psychoanalysis to analyze trauma narratives. This gap restricts a deeper understanding of how trauma infiltrates mundane aspects of daily life and shapes individuals' subconscious processing of their experiences. This study addresses this issue by combining these theoretical approaches to provide a more holistic analysis of trauma narratives.

L for Life

“L for Life” narrates the everyday life of a school boy whose mind is occupied beyond the thoughts of school and family outings as normally boys at his age think. His mind was trapped by his lived experience, which made living difficult. The story goes as the boy sits by the window, gazing at the crack on the wall and simultaneously remembers the tragic incident of his



past life. The crack on the wall was caused by the soldier's rifle indicating the effect of war, which took his father away from him and left his bedtime story incomplete. The agony of being fatherless transforms his routine into a painful indication of what he has lost. His thoughts were occupied by those of his father and Palestinians.

Spared

"Spared" is yet another story of a school boy whose everyday life got traumatized by an unexpected and frightening event. On a holiday, the boy is waiting for his mother's cooking to be finished so that he can have his lunch and join his friends who are playing football in the street. He resides on the first-floor and from balcony he cheers his friend Ahmed, who hits the goal. All of a sudden, there was a huge flashlight that threw him in the midst of broken bricks and scattered glass pieces. He was immediately comforted by his bleeding mother, who nervously ensured the proper condition of all his body organs. After a few moments, he realized that the bomb blast had happened. The familiar environment, the street in which the boys were playing, was transformed into chaotic and tragic scene. His eyes search for his friends and witness the image of his friend Ahmed's scattered brain, burnt flesh all over and suffocating smoke. The boy's life, once defined by innocence, friends, games, and playful thoughts, was replaced by the harsh reality of life and mortality and gave a painful understanding of the world.

Please Shoot to Kill

"Please Shoot to Kill" narrates the story of a young protagonist struggling amidst the harsh realities of life. The protagonist, Laila, recalls her past life with her two siblings and parents, which is no longer the same. Laila's happy family collapsed after the disruption of Israeli soldiers. The story narrates two weeks of uncertain reality, where they are kept under the



soldier's eye. Fifteen days and nights were loaded with horror and fear of monster-like soldiers and Merkava tanks, which kept roaming. Fear peaked at the time of the soldier's entry with M16 rifles in his hands. Her father was shot down, and three-year-old sister, Laila's leg, was broken and molested. All they knew was "Apaches, F16s, tanks, bullets, soldiers, and blood" (29). The family's struggle to treat their father, who was bedridden and in need of emergency medical care, evinced optimal pain. With no proper medical facilities, his condition deteriorated daily. After four months, the father passed away, and the three-year-old sister could no longer walk.

The characters, two young schoolboys and Laila, stand for the intense trauma and stress experienced during and after the conflict of Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009). It was a three-week conflict between Israel and Hamas that took place in the Gaza Strip. Belen Fernandez documents, "On December 27, 2008, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead against the Gaza Strip — a twenty-two-day affair that ultimately dispensed with some 1,400 Palestinian lives, among them more than three hundred children"(Fernandez). Apart from death, Alareer recorded the destruction of 11,000 homes and numerous industrial buildings, bridges, roads, and other infrastructure.

The intense bombardment during Operation Cast Lead exposed civilians to constant shelling, air strikes, and ground invasions. This environment creates heightened fear and a sense of insecurity, particularly among children and vulnerable populations. Research indicates that exposure to violence, whether as a direct victim or witness, is strongly linked to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other psychological symptoms. In Gaza's context, the inability to escape or mitigate violence exacerbates these effects.



Children, as seen in studies such as those by Macksoud and Aber (1996), are especially vulnerable to war trauma because of their developmental stage. In Gaza, children not only witnessed the destruction of homes and schools but also experienced the loss of family members and friends. Prolonged exposure to such trauma can lead to a range of psychological and behavioral issues, including nightmares, anxiety, and lack of concentration. Interruption of education and normal routines further compounded these challenges.

Freud's theoretical framework

Freud's concepts of 'unconscious' and 'repression' are used to understand the character's trauma. His idea of 'unconscious' is the foundation for his psychoanalytic theory. The unconscious is a part of the mind that has a collection of traumatic experiences, unadmitted desires, emotions, fears, and so on. "The unconscious is the true physical reality; in its innermost nature, it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as incompletely presented by data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications by our sense organs" (Freud 613). Unconscious mind influences conscious behaviors and thoughts whereas 'repression' is a significant mechanism in the operation of the unconscious. According to Freud, repression is a process in which certain painful or traumatic thoughts are moved from conscious to unconscious.

The schoolboy's repressed memories of his shot dead father, which happened 12 years ago, found an outlet through his dreams and everyday unintended actions. Each day the boy stared at the "ugly crack" (13) that was caused by a gunshot, the image of his father flashed in his mind and he felt incomplete. His statement "Though I tried to dream you closer, it stayed away just like before" (33) reflected the unsolved trauma residing in his unconscious mind. He



unconsciously attempted to resolve the trauma by rethinking and reexperiencing the tragic shot of his father and the soldier who did that.

Yes, the same crack on the wall was caused by the rifle. Such an eyesore! Other times, I would gaze at it trying to recall how that soldier might look. That huge creature grabbed you out of my bed and did not give you the chance to finish my bedtime story. I cannot remember anything but his dusty, black boots, and frightening rifle. So many times, I tried to imagine how he would look like and always ended up believing that he was no more than a faceless monster (13).

Freud calls such a tendency to relieve trauma as repetition compulsion. It is a psychological phenomenon in which individuals are unconsciously forced to repeat or recall traumatic experiences. Despite being painful while repeating the tragic scene, it is an attempt made by an individual's unconscious mind to resolve trauma. The boy's contemplation of a faceless soldier, darkness, and completeness are indicatives of his unconscious struggle. His daily life is stolen by the thoughts of "thinking of you, of me, of Palestine, of the crack, of the blank wall, of you, of mama, of you, of my history class, of you, of God, of Palestine—of our incomplete story" (14).

The protagonist, a schoolboy from "Spared" is taken as another example of an unconscious mind. His everyday life, with fun activities and football games, was totally transformed by an unexpected bomb blast, which led to his long-lasting psychological trauma. The traumatic experience was repressed in his unconscious. The sudden flash of light followed by images of suffocating smoke, friends lying on the floor with an open head, scattered flesh, blood, and brain was too much for the little boy's consciousness to process. He stood trembling among the bricks and smashed glasses and struggled to face the reality of what happened to his



friends who were just playing. Being a survivor, he was haunted by a sense of guilt, as though he had done something wrong. His guilt was reflected in his statement “The others haunted me with their blaming looks everyday i went to school...They no longer looked at me the same way they used to before that awful day...they had a distant look...like I did something wrong” (23). Freud called this sense of guilt and helplessness a common reaction among trauma survivors. Here, the boy unconsciously repressed the feeling of helplessness and the reality of his own survival among friends who did not survive. He sadly ended the story, saying “No more games were played. No more goals. No more cheering” (23).

Laila’s recollections of the past in “Please Shoot to Kill” highlight the family’s struggle to adapt to their new reality. Her father’s death, sister’s molestation, and lack of medical facilities underscored the helplessness of their situation. She stated, “Time was insignificant, pain was insignificant, hope was insignificant, fear was insignificant, and the lives of people were definitely the most insignificant of all” (35). According to Freud, unbearable memories and emotions are pushed into the unconscious to protect their psyche. However, these repressed emotions manifest in other ways, such as Laila’s recurring fears, indicating the return of repressed emotions. She emphatically affirms, “Next time, finish your job. When you bomb, bomb, or end. And when you shoot, please shoot to kill” (36).

As portrayed in the stories, children in Gaza lead their lives in a constant state of uncertainty and fear. In an environment in which destruction and death become too frequent, children grow in pain. Boys oscillated between death and loss. In “L for Life,” beyond witnessing the violence and enduring the trauma, the boy has no other option than internalizing the violent death of his father as a normal part of existence. This leads to a distorted perception



of safety and the future. Whereas in “Spared,” the psychological trauma is evident in the boy’s survival in two ways. One is by looking at his school filled with students of “Amputated limbs. Scarred faces. Limping gaits” (23), and the other is a sense of survivor’s guilt. On the other hand, Laila struggled to adapt to her new reality.

Discussion

In today’s world, in comparison to the children of Gaza with others, they differ psychologically because of their continuous exposure to violence. Today, children in Gaza survive in an environment in which trauma is an everyday reality. Becoming parentless, homeless, or foodless deeply affects their mental health and their understanding of the world. It is too much for young minds who are still in the process or at the beginning of the process of understanding life and death. War trauma marks its psychological scars and forces children towards depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in Gaza.

The short stories “L for Life,” “Spared,” and “Please Shoot to Kill” from *Gaza Writes Back* provide vivid narratives that illuminate the deep psychological scars left on children in Gaza by war and violence. These stories act as a lens through which readers can glimpse the ongoing struggles faced by Palestinians, particularly children, in conflict-ridden environments. By examining the daily lives and internal experiences of the characters, it becomes evident that the trauma of war penetrates every facet of their existence by shaping not only their immediate reality, but also their perception of the future.

The exploration of these narratives through Freud’s psychoanalytic theory reveals the profound interplay between characters’ unconscious minds and their lived experiences. Children’s encounters with loss, violence, and helplessness are repressed into their unconscious,



manifesting as survivor's guilt, repetition compulsion, and a distorted understanding of safety and hope. The stories demonstrate how these psychological mechanisms are not just personal responses, but collective ones, reflective of an entire generation growing up under the shadow of war.

In "L for Life," the young protagonist's fixation on the crack in the wall becomes a metaphor for the unresolved trauma of losing his father. His repeated contemplation of the past reflects Freud's concept of repetition compulsion as his unconscious mind attempts to process and reconcile profound loss. Similarly, in "Spared," the traumatic rupture of the protagonist's innocent childhood highlights how sudden, violent events can alter a child's worldview irreparably. His survivor's guilt and haunting imagery of his friends' deaths underscore the enduring psychological burden of witnessing such horrors.

Meanwhile, Laila in "Please Shoot to Kill" epitomizes the cumulative trauma faced by families in Gaza. Her plea for finality in violence reflects the unbearable weight of prolonged suffering and unresolved grief. Her father's death, her sister's molestation, and family's inability to access medical care are emblematic of the systemic challenges faced by Palestinians. Freud's theories of repression and the return of the repressed are evident in her recurring fears and emotional detachment, which highlight the long-term psychological toll of living in a perpetual state of fear and loss.

Beyond individual stories, this study underscores the collective impact of conflict on the psyche of Palestinian children. Their development is troubled by the constant presence of violence, forcing them to navigate an existence in which destruction, death, and displacement are normalized. This normalization of trauma threatens not only their mental well-being, but also



their ability to envision a future free from fear. The cyclical nature of violence and its imprint on young minds perpetuates a cycle of psychological wounds that spans generations.

The stories also challenge readers to reconsider the notion of “everyday life” (323). As theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have argued, the everyday is a space where the ordinary intersects with the extraordinary, revealing deeper truths about human experience. In Gaza, the everyday is saturated with reminders of war, blurring the line between the mundane and the trauma. The characters’ struggles serve as poignant reminders of the resilience of the human spirit, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable adversities. In a broader context, the psychological impact of war on children in Gaza raises important questions regarding the responsibilities of the global community. The ongoing blockade, poverty, and exposure to violence demand urgent attention to address the mental health needs of the affected populations. International efforts should prioritize not only the immediate cessation of violence, but also the provision of psychological support and resources to help children and families heal from the scars of war.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *Gaza Writes Back* is more than a collection of stories. This is a testament to the resilience and humanity of those who endure unimaginable suffering. These narratives remind readers of the importance of empathy and the need to amplify voices from conflict zones. By engaging with these stories, we are called upon to confront the harsh realities faced by Palestinians and to advocate for a world where children are free to dream, play, and grow without the shadow of war. The stories, examined in this study, offer a powerful exploration of how trauma reshapes the everyday lives of children in Gaza. Through Freud’s psychoanalytic



framework, the repressed fears, guilt, and memories of these young protagonists are brought to light, revealing the intricate ways in which the unconscious mind processes and manifests its trauma. These narratives highlight the resilience of the human spirit and the urgent need for justice, healing, and peace in Gaza, reminding us of lasting impact of war on children.



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