I would accept the overall impression that *Orientalism* was written out of an extremely concrete history of personal loss and national disintegration – not only a few years before I wrote *Orientalism* – Golda Meir made her notorious and deeply orientalist comment about there being no Palestinian people. (Said, *Orientalism* 338)

Introduction

Histories of horror and war have informed and shaped trauma studies. The Holocaust has become the signifier for the ultimate human evil in Western culture: the ungraspable nature of the event and its impact on Western collective memory have instigated researchers and triggered experts’ interest. The magnitude of evil and the excesses of pain that struck European Jews during World War II imbued with it a deep sense of horror, guilt, and shame across Europe. Many post-war Westerners and intellectuals perceived the Holocaust and the atrocities of war as a stark indication of their moral and ethical failure, and dramatically saw themselves as accomplices, perpetrators, and collaborators, even by their silence.

Trauma studies are deeply rooted in the historical legacy of war and its bearings on Holocaust victims. This field evolved around Holocaust survivors and the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. In their *Testimony* (1992), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub
demonstrate how speaking about, listening to, witnessing and telling trauma stories about the self, though private, bear witness to a much wider reality; to something “larger than life”. Testimonial writing, such as fiction, poetry, letters, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, diaries, amongst others, is “to speak for others, and to others” and to break the silence of one’s horrifying story of pain and trauma. In fusing psychiatry and literary theories, Testimony foregrounds literature as a witness to trauma, in what “has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times” (5). Women, writes Felman, “cannot simply command autobiography” (What Does a Woman Want? 15). In her view, insofar as the female condition is essentially traumatic, women’s life narratives “cannot hold together as a whole” and remain evasive and uncontainable (15). Felman sees women’s autobiographies as testimonies to life and death. Being an essentially female condition, trauma shapes their writings. To write about one’s life and reconstruct the past attest to stories of survival and resistance: “Feminine autobiography cannot be a confession. It can only be a testimony: to survival. And like other testimonies to survival, its struggle is to testify at once to life and to the death – the dying – the survival has entailed” (16).

Trauma and literature – entwined in women’s life writings – come into being through language: they are discursive in nature.

As early as 1893, Freud noted the problematic nature of studying the human psyche and the intricacies of such endeavour. He pinpointed the evasive nature of the subject due to the smudged borders between the literary and the scientific, on the one hand, and the shifting grounds between the subject and object, on the other:

It still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own (Studies on Hysteria 231).

Stories pertain to the past and recalling them relies on the process of remembering. In his case studies, Freud wrote narratives about the suffering of his patients; he became a narrator/biographer as he constructed past wounds in an attempt to unburden and cure his patients who were traumatised victims of war and couldn’t easily disassociate themselves from the atrocities witnessed. Fixation on past events come in different forms and shapes, including nightmares, screaming, and hallucinations.
Freud realised, when considering the symptoms of traumatised soldiers in World War I, the daunting task of dealing with war victims. Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) analogises the child’s traumatic loss of his mother with the suffering of traumatised soldiers of the war. He recognises that the fixations of memory and the repetitions of painful experiences, their enaction and re-enaction, are attempts to master the traumatic event: “We are therefore left in doubt as to whether the impulse to work over in mind some overpowering experience so as to make oneself master of it can find expression as a primary event, and independently of the pleasure principle” (16). In Literature in the Ashes of History (2013), Caruth also argues that the child in the playground struggles to recreate the past “At the sight of its disappearance” (ix). In this article, I will try to demonstrate how writing memoirs for Palestinian women is an act of survival and “a claim to life in the face of this disappearing world” (xii). Palestinian women writers’ life narratives test the limits of trauma theories and autobiographies. I shall be considering In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story (2002), Return: A Palestinian Memoir (2015) by Ghada Karmi, My People Shall Live by Leila Khaled, My Home, My Prison (1984) by Raymonda Tawil, This Side of Peace: A Personal Account (1995) by Hanen Ashrawi, Nadia Captive of Hope: A Memoir of an Arab Woman (1999) by Fay Kanafani, Teta, Mother, and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women (2006) by Jean Said Makdisi, and A World I Loved: The Story of an Arab Woman (2009) by Wadad Makdisi, to mention only a few, in conjunction with trauma as it implicates history and memory in the process of writing and representing experiences of war, loss, and exile. I contend that the trauma of not belonging after 1948 is the ultimate articulation of belonging to Palestine in Palestinian women’s life narratives. I will be extending trauma theories to explore the Nakba of 1948 and its impact on Palestinian women’s life-narratives.

The Nakba (1948) as Unprecedented Traumatic Event

In her article “On the Exclusion of the Palestinian Nakba from the “Trauma Genre”” (2013), Rosemary Sayigh argues that trauma studies, as initiated by Felman, Laub and Caruth, is far from being universal and inclusive, insofar as “cultural frames of reference” set boundaries and in doing so trauma studies as a cultural production “delimit[s] what it recognizes as suffering” (52). Not including Palestine in trauma theories despite the
expansion of the field to incorporate along with the Holocaust a myriad of causes ranging from the partition of India to victims of AIDS and sexual abuse is ideologically and politically motivated (55). Sayigh maintains the urgency of inflecting Israeli colonial presence in Palestine to decode the loss and mourning as an undercurrent in Palestinian art and life; to fall short of mentioning the root cause that lies behind such pain and agony: the Nakba that happened in 1948 and is continuing into the present (55-6) is a gross distortion that dismisses the most defining aspect of Palestinian life, art, and identity. This watershed moment is not detected and considered by trauma theorists because of Western myopia as Judith Butler argues in Frames of War (2009): “Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable” (24). In engaging trauma theories to read Palestinian women’s life-narratives, this article tries to demonstrate the venues trauma theories offer, notwithstanding their “myopia” (Sayigh 57), their bringing new insights into the reading and understanding of Palestinian women’s narratives on the Nakba.

The Nakba marked the partition of Palestine and its subsequent disappearance from the world map. In Return (2015), Gahda Karmi defines it as “a seminal event in every Palestinian’s life, the root cause of all the suffering that followed” (213). Remembering the Nakba has hitherto been both problematic and controversial due to feeling of guilt, defeat, shame, and betrayal, especially amongst Palestinians who lived the event. Contrary to the Holocaust, the Nakba has never become “history”; in other words, it has never been stalled in the past due to its continuity into the present, hence stems one of the challenges accompanying trauma studies, when extended to the Palestinian ongoing Nakba. Moreover, the event has never been fully commemorated, documented, and accounted for primarily because its perpetrators were never held accountable for ethnically cleansing and dispossessing Palestinians. In Catastrophe Remembered (2005), Nur Masalha explores the Nakba and its impact on Palestinian refugees who live in the vicinity of the moving borders of Israel and affirms the importance of oral history, memory, and namely the oral testimonies of Nakba victims to document and write the victims’ version of history against the Israeli one. Trauma experiences of loss and dispossession are imbricated in and shaped by power relations over narrating and inscribing one’s stories and truth. Masalha argues that “the Nakba and ongoing
Palestinian suffering are surely a reminder of the reality of the suffering of the Jews in Europe” (3), but the Nakba stories are far from being heard despite the Palestinians’ deploiring conditions, that is to say Palestinians are still herded in refugee camps, immured in the open prison of Gaza, held without trial in Israeli prisons, dispersed in Israel, and dismissed as present absentees within what was their land. The one million Palestinians living as exiles in Israel are referred to as the present absentees within the Apartheid state of Israel: “[O]nly one word came to mind: Apartheid” (In Search of Fatima 441). The historian Salman Abu Sitta eloquently defines the Nakba in The Palestinian Nakba 1948:

The Palestinian Nakba is unsurpassed in history. For a country to be occupied by a foreign minority, emptied almost entirely of its people, its physical and cultural landmarks obliterated, its destruction hailed as a miraculous act of God and a victory for freedom and civilised values, all done according to a premeditated plan, meticulously executed, financially and politically supported from abroad, and still maintained today, is no doubt unique (5).

Remembering the Nakba in Palestinian Women’s Life Narratives

Life narratives of Middle Eastern women writers are sites of struggle and resistance. Be it against the hegemony of the West, the misogyny of the East, or both, their stories offer new ways of viewing the world and representing the self as a contested ground where discourses of trauma and suffering are dramatised. For Palestinian women, the stakes are even higher because of the triple contingency of gender, exile, and colonisation. They offer their scripts as acts of survival against erasure and claims of the non-existence of Palestine and Palestinian. I would like to argue here that In Search of Fatima authorises a narrative of resistance and survival against Israeli aggression and Western bias. The representations of Palestinian lives, torn and traumatised, disturb the narrative and anachronistically bring it back to 1948 Palestine. In his influential After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives (1986), Said defines the Palestinian writing style by quoting the iconic Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s verse “Where should we go after the last frontiers,/ where should birds fly after the last sky?” (2). Taken from “Earth Presses against Us” (Fewer Roses 14), this verse conjures up incompleteness and emptiness after the Nakba as central in the poem.
and suggestive of violence insofar as images of limb dismemberment and mutilation are employed to stand for Palestinians’ dispossession, defeat and forced exile: “Earth is pressing against us, trapping us in the final passage./To pass through, we pull off our limbs” (14). The Palestinian artistic style is both aesthetic and political as it narrates loss and resistance as a personal and collective traumatic experience. The “we” in the poem is a reminder of the shared and lived pain and suffering that Palestinians endure. The Nakba informed and shaped the Palestinian artistic style as tinged with incompleteness, uncertainty, fluidity, and belonging through non belonging. In The Last Sky, Edward Said highlights the “the elusive, resistant, reality it [Palestinian literature] tries so often to represent”, and argues that “particularly in fiction, the struggle to achieve form expresses the writer’s efforts to construct a coherent scene, a narrative that might overcome the almost metaphysical impossibility of representing the present” (38). Palestinian life narratives intersplice the stories of what Said calls “the personal loss” with those of other Palestinians and draw on the personal as representative of and different from other Palestinian experiences. The loss that inhabits Palestinian female memoirs and the struggle to make sense of the present is, in my understanding, inherently related to the present nature of the “‘al nakba al-mustamirrah’ translated into English as ‘the ongoing Nakba’” (Sayigh 56).

In Search of Fatima dramatises, from the eyes of a small girl, the turbulent years that have led to the mass exodus of many Palestinians and their exile to foreign lands and temporary refugees’ camps. In 1948, Ghada Karmi’s family left for Syria and then moved to London where they joined the father who was working for the BBC. At the heart of her narrative is Palestine and Palestinian loss. The dream-based world of the memoirs’ setting is grounded in the history and geography of a land present only in its absence, whereby writing becomes a form of remedy, resistance, and survival, and the narrative discourse in Palestinian women’s memoirs resonates with the writers’ plight as Palestinian: in this context, the political is indeed personal, and Leila Khaled writes in her autobiography “[It] is not politics [but] it is a matter of life and death” (20). In Search of Fatima was written by a woman who lived the 1948 and was forced into exile. That momentous event is final in its physicality and enduring in its emotional repercussions. Palestine is referred to as an untimely buried body whose death is made more tragic by not mourning it; in other words, the Palestinian Nakba is a story of loss that has yet to be bewailed and
told: “We never set eyes on Fatima or our dog or the city we had known ever again. Like a body prematurely buried, unmourned, without coffin or ceremony, our hasty, untidy exit from Jerusalem was no way to have said goodbye to our home, our country and all that we knew and loved” (123). Ghada’s family left the house, Fatima, the maid, and Rex, the family dog. Each one of those left behind have stronger ties and claims to the land than Ghada and her social class. The house, in Qatamon-Jerusalem, stands for Jerusalem, and by implication Palestine with its past history, Fatima the peasant, emblematises resistance as the archetypal mother of the Fedayeen, and the dog as the ultimate symbol of loyalty and faithfulness. The three are deserted and left “defenceless to the hordes” (210) and to a fate of lived dispossession, impoverishment, and exile in what was their home. The child Ghada knows, the moment she has left her house, that there would be no going back; she has seen that in the tears of Fatima, the sad eyes of Rex, and the closing gates of the house. People who left thinking they will return are guilty and “woefully wrong” (123).

Childhood memories during that \textit{annus horribilis} are vividly remembered, graphically relayed, and painstakingly documented. The memoir charters the loss of Karmi’s home and the disintegration of her country. What came to be known as the Nakba runs like a sinister stream across \textit{In Search of Fatma} and gathers force at different turning points in the life of its narrator: It haunts, torments, and traumatises her as a burden of guilt and pain. The Nakba, - is a cataclysmic event that still reads like an open wound; - it scared her being and shattered her world. What is striking in her text is her description of her helplessness as a child and her feeling of loss that she cannot express in her writing. The memoir comes close in form and content to an oral testimony where the speaker is going through a cathartic session. The simplicity of the employed diction, and unparalleled sentence-structure warrant the acute clarity and painful vividness of the itinerary of loss that colour the narrative self as the narrator digs into her buried, forgotten childhood and unearths it in the narrative with a profoundly elegiac tone. Those scenes of childhood loss and remembrance ceaselessly permeate her account in an astonishing circularity: “With utter clarity, the little girl saw in that moment that he knew [Rex] what she knew, that they would never meet again” (2). The very image of the dog, Fatima, and the house in Jerusalem never subsides and keeps surging almost always: “And so it was that we too lost Fatma, not knowing how to pluck her from the human whirlpool that had swallowed her after our departure. As for Rex,
whom we last saw that April morning in 1948, no news of him reached us ever again” (127).

In this respect, Ghada Karmi’s work showcases that memoir-writing for Palestinian women is a site where discourses of trauma and self-representation merge. 1948 is the date of Karmi’s eviction from her home in Palestine and is a recurrent theme in the narrative. The memories of Rex, the house, and more than anything else Fatima are intensified by recalling the killing, and the bombing that hastened the family’s flight (210). Karmi’s narrative fails to contain the sporadic resurfacing of her time in Jerusalem that continuously surge from the recesses of the psyche whereby the flow of the text’s events is submerged, and disrupted by them. The collapse of her world made her realise that her life in exile with all its components, including the dog her brother, Ziad, acquired in London cannot substitute the loss of Rex (44-45). There is a constant movement between the past and the present, between Palestine and England in so far as past memories and the present overlap and merge in the narrative as one. Because her childhood memories are so overwhelmingly present, the narrative is buttressed by uncontrollable bursts that materialise in long and detailed repetitive passages from the pre-Nakba Palestine, and nostalgia. One of the most striking passages of In Search of Fatma is about memory, recovery, trauma and the process of remembering Rex, the house, and Fatima, that are her only means to recovery:

This [flight] played directly into my own loss of memory. In some subtle and insensible way, I find that I had wiped out all remembrance of Jerusalem. If I ever thought about it, it was to realise with some shock that I could no longer recall the way our house had looked, or Rex, or even the features of Fatima’s face. Those essential memories of childhood had simply melted away, leaving only shadows and elusive fragments of feeling (210).

In Trauma and Recovery (2008), Judith Herman states that “an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history” (2), an act which implies re-living and re-experiencing the past; in other words, reconstructing it through memory. This can be compared to a third person narrator in a contemporary work of fiction, in which the narrator’s knowledge is limited, flawed, and even misleading. Trauma stories, like postmodern literature, are fragmented, grotesque, and fluidly ungraspable: the reader/critic may bring meaning to the text in the same way the listener/
psychiatrist can help the traumatised anchor their memories in some form of reality and veracity.

The autobiographical act’s allegiance to history and memory, on the one hand, and its conflation with trauma, on the other, require further elucidation. Leigh Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001) foregrounds the place of trauma in contemporary memoirs and explores the representations of the self in the context of representing trauma. The joint project of representing the self and representing trauma through “limit cases” (19) transforms both autobiographies and trauma studies. “Limit cases” operate when self-representations and the representation of trauma coincide and are answers to the inherent paradox of failed memory and reliable testimony (20-21) as they engage “autobiography’s central concerns and a refusal of autobiography’s form and the judgements it imports” (19). I suggest that Palestinian women’s autobiographies not only test the limits of both the theories of trauma studies and self-representation but also serve as historical and personal records of national implications. They document past events and commemorate the Nakba as part and parcel of their history and identity as Palestinians against erasure.

The thrust of Gilmore’s argument is how trauma and self-representation require and expand the limits of autobiography and how the representations of trauma hinge on the representations of the self. The centrality of trauma in contemporary Palestinian memoirs offers new insights into the Palestinian plight and takes Western readers, to whom the works are primarily directed, to new and unchartered territories. Gilmore convincingly states that “the compulsory inflation of the self to stand for others” (12) is necessary in what she terms “limit cases” texts. The discourse of truth about a real life is a synergy of sources and positionings where charges of lying cannot undermine the narrative for reasons related to the way history, politics, ideology, and the nature of the traumatic event are defined and articulated. The autobiographical act’s allegiance to history and memory results in the fusion of fiction and facts in the representation of the self as part of a community. The frustration within the narrative discourse in *In Search of Fatima* with the English public bias to Israel and lack of sympathy towards Palestinians is the result of how history is conceptualised and written as Conway convincingly shows in her reading of history as a natural corollary of locations and standpoints: “if you want to tell the history of the world in 1492, we westerners talk about Columbus, but if you’re from the Arab world a very different series of events is important”
The glaring atrocities committed by both the Haganah led by Moshe Dayan (88) and the Irgun and Stern Gang led by Menachem Begin in Deir Yassin and other villages and cities are catalogued in memoirs dealing with the Nakba, such as My Home, My Prison by Raymonda Tawil and Nadia Captive of Hope by Fay Kanafani, to mention only a few. Karmi reminds the readers of Begin’s unabashed statement about the massacres of Deir Yassin and how “it was worth half a dozen army battalions in the war against the Palestinian Arab” (126). Both leaders were listed as terrorists during the British mandate, only to serve later as Israeli prime ministers, and their terrorist groups formed the army of Israel. Thus far the ongoing Nakba and the past Nakba are shrouded in denial and undermined by issues related to power and power relations that determine whose stories are heard and whose narratives prevail. The Israeli stories are endorsed and shielded within the prevailing Western colonial discourse which led to the creation and support of Israel in the heart of the Arab world as a fake democracy.

My People Shall Live: Autobiography of a Revolutionary (1973) by Leila Khaled, My Home, My Prison (1984) by Raymonda Tawil, This Side of Peace: Personal Account by Hanen Ashrawi (1995), Nadia Captive of Hope: Memoir of an Arab Woman (1999) by Fay Kanafani, Teta, Mother, and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women (2006) by Jean Said Makdisi, A World I Loved: The Story of an Arab Woman (2009) by Wadad Makdisi, amongst others, were penned by Palestinian women, and portray the loss of Palestine in 1948 and the repercussions of that loss on people’s everyday lives and psyche. The burgeoning of Palestinian memoirs in English shows the urgency of speaking directly to the Anglophone world and the need to inscribe their own historical truth. The memoirs are buttressed by long passages about the refugees’ camps and the historical formation of the state of Israel. They painstakingly document the involvement of the Haganah and Irgun in acts of terror against the Palestinians. These memoirs are testimonies against terror and current claims of terrorism against Palestinians who are resisting occupation and underscore the authors’ determination to survive as a collective group against erasure. In Resistance Literature (1987), Barbara Harlow argues that memoirs emanating from experiences of exile, colonialism and so cultural differences challenge the genre of autobiography and its generic boundaries. Exiles, immigrants, colonised, and neo-colonised subjects deploy “autobiographical practices that go against the grain” and in so doing the “I’ they create becomes a place of creative and, by implication, political intervention” (xv). They
see in this genre a productive and empowering process to enter language and resist negation. Their life narratives invite Western readers to view a “different world” and represent a serious challenge “to both western generic conventions and literary theories” (xvi). The marginalised subject sees in this genre a project of resistance and a space for presenting the history of their tragedy of loss. The Nakba as a traumatic event, pivotal in the authorisation of the text, acquires new overtones because of its ripple effect on the confused self, and the disintegrated country.

Memory and Trauma Writing: “Permission to Narrate”

Writing, as a form of self-preservation against loss and emptiness, is not novel: it has its therapeutic effect on both the writer and the reader because they are both implicated in what Felman and Laub call “a crisis in history translated into a crisis of literature insofar as literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history, which precisely cannot be articulated in the given category of history” (xviii). Literature becomes in this respect a negotiating space between history, memory, and fiction as a trauma witness. Literary discourse is not tested against history, but it is a generator of history and truth about trauma and pain. In “‘My Beautiful House’ and Other Fabrications by Edward Said” (1999), Justus Weiner, a US-born Zionist in residence at the Jerusalem Centre for Public Studies, first published his attacks, on the Commentary on the eve of the publication of Said’s Out of Place: A Memoir (1999), on grounds related to Said’s birthplace, schooling, family and friends, and many of the minute details Said included in his memoirs. Commentary, a right-wing journal, published back in the eighties “The Professor of Terror” (1989) by Edward Alexander and a couple of slandering articles on Edward Said and his works. The articles are attempts to discredit Said as a high-profile Palestinian political figure and outstanding critic. Belonging to Palestine as dramatized in his life-narrative is unashamedly dismissed by Weiner as untrue, namely his roots in Jerusalem. Weiner, who spent three years checking and verifying records, interviewing more than twenty people, investigating the school records and birth certificates, came up with the conclusion that Said constructed a myth around his origins and belonging.1 In autobiographical genres, charges of fake accounts about the past as opposed to authentic/real ones are irrelevant insofar as memories, trauma,
and writing are concerned. Traumatic events and memories of the past intersect with history, testimony, and fiction, according to the historian Dominick LaCapra:

Testimony makes claims of truth about experience or at least one’s memory of it, more tenuously, about events (although obviously one hopes that someone who claims to be a survivor did experience the events in reality). Still, the most difficult and moving moments of testimony involve not claims of truth but experiential ‘evidence’ – the apparent reliving of the past, as a witness, means going back to an unbearable scene, being overwhelmed by emotion and for a time unable to speak (131).

The writing of past events is prone to memory-loss and faking/lying or forgetting/remembering as an integral part of representing traumatic events which are, in their turn, an extension of representing the self. Past events marked by deep wounds hinge on people’s memories, so details related to places, street names, exact days and dates are easily wiped out and hardly retrieved. On her visit to what had once been her home, Karmi “was bitterly disappointed to find that [she] remembered so little” (443) because of “A baffling amnesia has enveloped that time [her childhood years in Qatamon-Jerusalem]” (115). The nature of Israel as a settler colonial power on the land of Palestine relentlessly engages, almost on a daily basis, in erasing Palestinian history by demolishing towns, wiping villages, deporting people, and destroying communities by severing them from their culture and heritage on the one hand, and erecting Jewish edifices to legitimise the presence of European emigrants, on the other hand. Thus charges of fake accounts are possibilities, especially when made by Zionists and right wing American and European Jews who don’t belong to the land and are, by virtue of their religion, given Israeli nationalities to sustain the demographic supremacy of Jews in Israel whilst killing, expelling and terrorising Palestinians in their own houses and lands. Exigencies of accuracy and truth telling about details such as names and dates are secondary, if not of no relevance. Gahda Karmi never mentions the exact day of her departure from Palestine, she only recalls April 1948, and similarly could not locate her house when she goes there. Longing for Palestine and origins cannot be fake because the act of longing doesn’t happen in vacuum; it operates within an emotive set of connections to a land, a religion, a family, and a community that used to exist and ceased because of colonialism. In both Said’s and Karmi’s memoirs remembering
is synonymous with identity and belonging to Palestine. The memoirs written by Palestinian who experienced the Nakba are testimonies against silence and negation. Perhaps the attacks levelled against Said are futile in their endeavour to erase Palestine and wipe the continuous Nakba as a living testimony on past and present Palestinians’ suffering.

Notwithstanding the fact that Said was not lying, what Weiser missed is the ongoing tragedy of the Palestinian people, the realities of refugee camps, and the disintegration of their country. The place of trauma in contemporary memoirs and the recognition of trauma’s centrality render the debate around truth and lie not only irrelevant, but dismissive of the essence of people’s experiences and enduring pain. The issue of whether Said is telling the truth, which I think he does, is aimed to undermine the Nakba and the Palestinian plight. The authenticity of the Nakba as an ongoing tragedy is a clear reminder of what Weiser is trying to falsify and fails because Said’s works are seminal in advocating the Palestinian cause and taking it to a worldwide stage. What holds always true is the cataclysmic loss of one’s country and its disintegration. Many works from Holocaust literature are tested not against the details of everyday life in the concentration camps but the anguish and pain of the living witnesses who came from the brink of death to tell their stories. Witnessing history in the making by sharing each other’s trauma as stated above is what literature is grappling with in our postmodern world.

*Re-writing the History of Palestine from a Palestinian Standpoint*

Ghada Karmi’s *In Search of Fatima* is a rewriting of the history of Palestine from the standpoint of an Arab Palestinian woman, and thus offers a counter narrative that dislodges the certitude of Israeli official historical accounts on Palestine that resonates in the USA and in many Western countries’ public opinion and mainstream media. She informs the readers that the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, was “built on the flattened and now unrecognisable land of the Palestinian village of Lifta” (440) and by implication exposes the tragic irony of such a democratic emblem: Israel is often referred to as the only democracy in the Middle East in the official political discourse of Western leaders, namely in the USA, is a colonial power with a history of dispossession and ethnic cleansing. The passage that comes next is tragically touching because it shows the
hypocrisy of Western colonial powers and how they scapegoated Palestine to compensate the Jews, the victims of European wars and anti-Semitism, for the crimes committed against them:

[T]he Holocaust museum nearby was built on confiscated Arab land. Inside, there was a brilliant and affecting exhibition of tragic European-Jewish history, skilfully interwoven with the creation of modern Israel; seemingly logical progression from the gas chambers to Palestine, not omitting pictures of the Mufti of Jerusalem negotiating with the Nazi (440)

In pondering the history of Palestine alongside her own life, Karmi’s narrative can be read in conjunction with history, memory, and dislocation as an exile in Britain. The personal and political are interconnected and resonate in her narrative; they pressure her to tell and struggle to remember. The real conditions of colonialism and Zionism make her personal account a political intervention and an act of resistance. The Nakba is ingrained in her memories in concrete way: “When I close my eyes and think of that time in Jerusalem, I can feel the still summer afternoons […] one could almost touch the warmth stillness” (52)

The major turning points in Karmi’s life coincide with the history of Palestine despite its disappearance from the world map. The opening passage is emotionally moving and disturbingly tragic, it depicts the family’s departure from their home in Qatamon, a Palestinian residential area in Jerusalem. Ghada’s life in that house before that watershed moment, the Nakba, is synonymous with peace, love, warmth, and belonging or a dreamt of version of the original paradise. The nostalgic and idyllic depiction of her childhood is set against the realities of exile in1950s London. The trope of cold in the memoir is an important symbol and an index of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), an acronym defined by Leys as “a disorder of memory” whereby the mind “is unable to register the wound to the psyche because the ordinary mechanisms of awareness and cognition are destroyed” (2). The narrator’s banishment, and dislocation, in other words, her exile was heaped on the pain of past experiences and emotional numbing. In this respect, “loss and national disintegration” is exasperated by her displacement in a glacially foreign country. When she marries an English doctor, she tries to reconcile herself with England: “In marrying John I had sought to belong to England” (377). But soon after the outbreak of war between the Arabs and Israel, she realizes that the events
in the Middle East will always shape her life. Her husband’s support of the state of Israel led to her divorce “in the summer of 1968”: her life “had been nothing but a sham” (377), and “The sense of belonging I had nurtured was only a pretence that I could no longer support” (377). Alienation in a country she has tried hard to be part of is her destiny as an exile: the cold weather and the triumphalist attitude of many Jews in England after 1967 made her reconsider her own life.

The defeat of Al Hazima is a turning point in her life, the life of many Palestinians, Arabs, and Israelis. It has impacted modern Arabic literature in both form and content. Robert Young’s keynote speech at a conference hosted by Qatar University in May 2014, foregrounds the 1967 Six-Day War and its reverberations on the Palestinian psyche: he refers to Palestinian male writers and heavily relies on the theories of Said and his own intentions to finish the unfinished work of Said. Young argues that the force of decay and national disintegrations are conveyed anachronistically to the current Palestinian reality in Palestinian art in the works of many Palestinian male authors, such as Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Kanafani, and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra where images of running men or grieving women amidst destruction, dilapidation, and decay are replete. Palestinian women’s memoirs are more open about feelings of guilt than their male counterparts: they celebrate, as in In Search of Fatima, those who remain on the land and focus more on children and women than on physical strength and falling concrete blocks as forces of resistance or Somood. What is worth noting is the significance of childhood in the process of writing memoirs. Karmi and many other Palestinian women writers touch on the ambivalence of their parents towards Palestine and their helplessness as young girls.

**Memory, Mourning, and Writing**

*In Search of Fatima* incorporates the representations of trauma as it grapples with issues related to self-discovery, mourning and writing. The belatedness of grieving and mourning complicated the representations of loss and posit a challenge to memory, language, and the traumatic experience as a textual production. To write about pain is, in a sense, cathartic and palliative. Using Caruth’s theories on the “unspeakability” and “unrepresentability” of trauma can bring further elucidation to my reading of book as a testimony to and understanding of the Nakba as a belatedly unassimilated event because
of its brevity and too devastating an impact. Caruth’s definition of trauma as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event” (4) brings new insights into my understanding of Karmi’s text. The pathology consists “solely in the structure of the experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it” (Trauma 4-5). Equally, Karmi’s departure from Palestine and its repercussions on the whole family have not been fully assimilated. The text unbalanced short, long and fragmented sentences convey a sense of absurdity, and echoes the “unrepresentability” of the experience. For example, the prologue, narrated in the third person, evidences the narrator’s painful attempt to distance herself from the child Ghada and thus results in a narrative schism that reflects the aftereffects of Karmi’s wound, and underscores the “unrepresentability” of the Nekba: “[A] mighty crash that shook the house. Something – a bomb - a mortar, a weapons’ store? – exploded with a deafening bang. The little girl could feel it right inside her head” (1). Leaving Palestine, a major event in the book, is snapshotted and remains present because of its brevity and pathos:

Every nerve and Fibre of her being raged against her fate, the cruelty of leaving that she was powerless to avert, she put her palms up against the gate and Rex started barking and pushing at it, thinking she was coming in. Her mother dragged her away into the back seat of the taxi onto Fatima’s lap (2).

The disruption within the narrative and its episodic structure connote the lasting disjunctive nature of the moment. The passages about her departure from Palestine are repetitive and dexterously reflect the semi-articulacy of the childlike helplessness to relay the event and express her own feelings. Karmi and her family cannot remember the exact dates and time, they only recall the period predating their flight when they are not able to sleep because of heavy shelling: “Sometimes we find it hard to sleep at night for the whistling of bullets and the thunder of shells…to me this was terrifying and bewildering, so far removed from anything I recognised as normality that I think I became a little shell-shocked” (111). Those who left that day thought they would go back home when things better, a matter of few weeks. But the weeks grow into months, the months into years and Palestine becomes, as time passes, a fleeting memory and
a permanent wound for all (210). For Karmi, the painful moments come to her in dreams, nightmares, guilt, and other symptoms of PSTD: the haunting details of her final departure from her home in Jerusalem has an overwhelming impact on her life and the life of her family.

*In Search of Fatima* starts in Jerusalem in April 1948, and ends in Al Aqsa Mosque in August 1991 with the call to prayer. Chapter fourteen chronicles her disheartening visit to Israel and reads like a belated elegy to the country she left fifty years ago. Karmi perceives Israel as a burial site that bears witness to the history of the pre-Nakba Palestine. In *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013), Caruth argues that history is not available for immediate conscious access: “it emerges […] as the performance of its own erasure” (xi). The chapter is divided into fourteen entries corresponding to her stops in Israel from the airport of Ben Gurion to the Al Aqsa Mosque. The modern state of Israel, only fifty year old at the time of her visit, is depicted as an excavating site where Palestinian ruins lay beneath and testify to the personal and collective loss of the Palestinian people: exile, and Arab Israeli “second class” citizens. Many of them are Israel’s cheap labour force who live in a separate world within the same country: “Jaffa had been Palestine’s foremost city, to which Tel Aviv had been no more than an annex. Now it was depressed, dilapidated slum. Its streets and buildings were in disrepair, its Palestinian inhabitants reduced to poverty. Here and there fine Arab houses were still in evidence” (427).

Seen from her perspective, Palestine is indeed buried under the ashes of the modern state of Israel, but to her, Israel is only the surface that covers the essence of the land and its enduring history. Her memory harbours between remembering and erasure, and it becomes clear that the metaphor of the archaeological dig on the vanishing site, as suggested by Caruth, is the narrator’s only means to retrieve her buried childhood memories: “The Hilton Hotel overlooking the sea is built on the site of a huge Muslim cemetery, which was bulldozed flat […] The centre of Tel Aviv was a slice of Europe” (427).

Karmi goes to Israel on a short visit in 1991 but doesn’t accept it as a reality. She records and effaces Israel by remembering the atrocities that happened to the Palestinian villages, towns, communities that used to live there, and namely the country forced to disappear from the map. It is fascinating to see the metonym of the city of ashes and historical Palestine. In *Literature in the Ashes of History*, Caruth pays special attention to Freud’s analysis of Wielhem Jensen’s Novella, *Gradiva: A Pompeian*
Fantasy (1900)² and reads the return of the novella’s protagonist, a young archaeologist, to the burial site of ancient Pompeii looking for Gradiva as a “return to the sight of catastrophe to grasp an origin that marks the beginnings of his urgent desire to remember” (xi). Similarly, Karmi’s account of her trip to Israel reads like a burial commemoration of the dead and usurped land with its haunting ruins and shabby villages: “a ghostly reminder of a presence not quite buried” (436) and realises, nonetheless, and for good, that she does not belong there; something has been lost and can never be retrieved. Her ties were cut ages before when her parents took her to London. Her urge to return is met by her realisation of the impossibility of returning and of the utter reality of departing. It is worth signalling that the repetition of dreams, nightmares, and all symptoms of PTSD are part of Karmi’s artistic representation of herself, both individually and collectively intended. The process of self-introspection as an inherent component of self-reflective writing is key to both trauma and writing as a healing process: Caruth convincingly demonstrates how literature remains the ultimate witness to trauma and its rippling effects.

Writing forestalls death; Karmi’s attempts to document past life are sustained by her use of photographs, and the three major maps of Palestine. The different maps of Palestine narrate in their own turn, and in line with the narrative discourse, the shrinking and disappearance of Palestine: they span the fifty-year birthday of Israel and the erasure of Palestine.
that makes the possibility of a two-state solution not only impossible, but a misleading saga. In *The Zionist Bible* (2013), Masalha refers to Palestine as the “sacred landscape” that has sustained so many scars because of its fragmentation due to colonial intervention aiming at legitimising Israel and erasing Palestine hence: “The face of the ‘holy landscape’ is so scarred by modern archaeological excavation, ethnic displacement and wars of conquest” that testify to “European cultural power and legitimation and as a site of visual appropriation and a focus for the formation of Israeli national identity as well as a process of political silencing of the Palestinian” (7).

Writing about the past of one’s life “does not act as a single account” but “belongs to a whole story” that is still taking shape. Joyce Carol Oates sees memoirs as the most seductive and dangerous of literary genres: “The memoir is a repository of truths, as each discrete truth is uttered, but the memoir cannot be the repository of Truth which is the very breadth of the sky, too vast to be perceived in a single gaze” (300). Oates capitalises the Truth to show that it cannot be contained in one memoir and that it is still part of the process of adding accounts to a story in the making. Karmi emphasises her own loss but counts on those living in the land to keep fighting and resisting. The truth about Palestinians and the authority of the authors’ testimony to facts of history binds the personal and the socio-political (Beverly 27). Feminine autobiography “can only be a testimony to survival. And like other testimonies to survival, its struggle
is to testify at once to life and to “the death – the dying – the survival has entailed” (Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?* 16). Writing, as testimony, is a process rather than an evidence of a completed work. It is bound up with survival and bears witness to history as “precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 24). The aftermath impact of losing one’s country and wrestling with language to convey how the event is lived through the eyes of vulnerable children authenticate and sustain Palestinian women’s accounts: the Nakba has an apocalyptic effect on their lives; it has marked the death of their childhood and the shuttering of their world. A “life testimony”, writes Felman “is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life” (*What Does a Woman Want?* 2). In this sense, reconstructing the past in memoirs is not a straightforward process.

*Conclusion*

In my reading, Karmi’s memoir challenges the genre of autobiography and its generic boundaries. The marginalised subject sees in this genre a project of resistance and a space for presenting the history of their tragedy of loss: the narrative oscillates between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ as representations of Palestinians. Because of experiences of war, exile, and displacement, her claims to the land and the suffering of its people is as strong as those uttered inside Palestine. Despite the illusiveness of language and its inadequacy to convey trauma, Caruth foregrounds that it is a “very daunting task to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen” (2). Both literature and trauma elude conventional representations because of their uniqueness and belatedness, but unlike other forms of injuries, trauma is characterised by its profound and inarticulate pain. The deeper the wound, the more challenging its representability and by implication its cure becomes. Paradoxically, “the more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail” (Herman 8). Trauma’s victims are prone to different kinds of emotions, memory failure, and lack of words to narrate their stories. More than all that, “The study of psychological trauma must constantly contend with this tendency to discredit the victim or to render her invisible” (Herman 8). Yet Caruth’s understanding of
the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim of trauma blurs boundaries between the victim and perpetrator. Her reading of Tancred and Clorinda in Gerusalemme Liberata is quite disturbing in the way she identifies trauma with the perpetrator, Tancred, who unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda twice, first in the duel and second in his slashing of the big tree in the crusaders’ forest. However, her contribution in challenging the binary between the victim and perpetrator and the “unwitting re-enactment of the event as an inadvertent and unwished for the repetition of the traumatic experience” (Unclaimed 2) are undeniably incisive interventions in trauma theories.

Eliding the victim and the perpetrator in Caruth’s reading of the parable is convincingly, if not harshly, critiqued by Ruth Leys in Trauma: A Genealogy: “it is not Tancred but Clorinda who is the undisputable victim of a wounding” (297). Amy Novak adds the gender and racial layers that Caruth obscures in her reading and contends that “the voice that cries out is not a universal nor is it a generic female voice: it is the female voice of black Africa” (“Who Speaks? Who Listens?” 32). Michael Rothberg takes all three critics to task when he demonstrates that trauma is not only the prerogative of the victims:

the categories of victim and perpetrator derive from either a legal or a moral discourse, but the concept of trauma emerges from a diagnostic realm that lies beyond guilt and innocence or good and evil […] Precisely because it has the potential to cloud ethical and political judgements, trauma should not be a category that confirms moral values – as Leys and Norvak, but not Caruth, seem to imply (90).

In my understanding of the victim/perpetrator paradigm within the colonial context, I find Fanon’s chapter “Colonial War and Mental Disorder” in The Wretched of the Earth (1961) of significance. Fanon, a psychiatrist by profession, saw through his enduring psychiatric sessions at Blida Hospital, in Algeria, how Colonialism induces both victim and perpetrator to violence and so suffering. Cases number four and five in The Wretched dramatise the suffering of a French inspector and a police officer from mental disorder in colonised Algeria because of torturing and killing Algerian freedom fighters and innocent civilians suspected of helping the FNA (Algerian National Front). The inspector’s case is very serious and his torturing expands to his own children and wife (194-99) and shows how trauma can severely harm the perpetrator as it harms the
victims of trauma. This does in no way undermine or mitigate colonial violence, but indicates how violence in all its aspects has a whirlpool effect that eventually consumes both the victim and the perpetrator. Perceiving perpetrators as victims does not make them less guilty, as Lacapra states in Writing History (7), but expands the field of trauma studies and in so doing contextualises and historicises trauma as it effects people under colonialism, in refugee camps, or war zones outside Western Europe. To go back to my text, the woman narrator, in the memoir, is a victim of Israeli colonial presence who were themselves the victims of the Holocaust. In describing in detail her status in England as a Palestinian refugee, her struggle to learn the language, to preserve her religion as a Muslim, and to connect to her country of origin can be seen as different from and similar to many persecuted Jews in Europe in the past.

Dwelling at a crossroads between a multiplicity of disciplines, Felman and Laub incorporate the literary and psychiatric and thus demonstrate literature’s centrality to trauma theories. Felman states that “testimony is the literary – or discursive – mode par excellence of our times, and our era can precisely be defined as the age of testimony” (Testimony 5). This literary mode is potentially an unending attempt at exploring trauma and its impact on the human mind. The interplay of language and memory in the process of writing remains unexplored. Yet “Literature and art as a precocious mode of witnessing – of accessing reality – when all other modes of knowledge are precluded” (xx). In this respect, In Search of Fatima was written at the conjunction with history, memory, and dislocation. The personal and political are interconnected and resonated in the narrative; they pressure the narrator/protagonist to tell and struggle to remember. In my view, the entire contemporary Palestinian artistic production is shrouded by the trauma of exile, of the loss of Palestine; and the unfolding tragedy of the Palestinian people in and outside the occupied land. In this sense, Palestinian art can be compared to a funeral procession that veers towards resurrection at the very gates of death. To take one example, the autobiographical act has served as an emotive platform for Karmi to tell her “Palestinian Story” as both a collective plight and a personal loss. This article has tried to argue the significance of literature in bearing witness to trauma and engaged the theories of trauma and autobiographies to read Palestinian women’s autobiographies. In a comparative vein, this work has tried to demonstrate the relevance of contemporary literature in attesting to human suffering and alleviating pain by listening/reading/witnessing and so
healing. Edward Said’s writings on orientalism and Palestine have served to frame the overall discussion of the article. The trauma of exile, dispersion, and “national disintegration” are narrated by many Palestinian writers and poets from inside and outside Palestine, namely Mahmoud Darwish, Ghada Karmi, Ghassan Kanafani, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Sahar Khalifeh, and Fadwa Tuqan as a shared experience by many Palestinian artists both in Palestine and in exile. Palestinian identities are defined as in a permanent state of suffering, guilt and pain. Karmi’s narrative conflates muteness and invisibility with death and trauma, and writing and healing with resistance and survival. *In Search of Fatma* reveals, in part, Palestinians’ complicity, and political and social friction in Palestine during 1948. Ahmad Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod correctly argue for the urgency of re-examining some disturbingly dark spots and blotted corners in the process of remembering and writing the Nakba:

If we acknowledge the ways memory is shaped by present politics, the nationalist narrative that make the past seem more whole and identities more fixed and comfortable that they were, by nostalgia for an idealized and pastoral past, by deliberate silencing of uncomfortable events (like rapes) that did happen, or by reluctance to bring forth Palestinian complicity, culpability, and collaboration, do we thereby undermine the force of memory as a political tool? If we acknowledge that individual memory is just as partial, inconsistent, and subject to the ravages of time and age, do we undermine the capacity to speak truth to power? Or to become the basis for claims to justice? We do not think so (22-23).
1 In Germania il ‘reale’ è tema di un Graduiertenkolleg (doctoral training program) finanziato dalla Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft all’Università di Costanza; sulla ‘fatticità’ si incentra invece un analogo programma di studi presente all’Università di Friburgo.

2 Uno degli autori più influenti per questo indirizzo di studi è Quentin Meillassoux, a partire dalla sua opera *Après la finitude*.


4 Rimando, tra le altre pubblicazioni, a Vaccaro, *Biopolitik und zoopolitik*.

5 Sulle perturbante prossimità tra la metaforica dell’evoluzionismo e quella dell’estetica classica cfr. Cometa, “die notwendige literatur.”

6 Le riflessioni di Menninghaus iniziano con osservazioni relative al mito di Adone, che nella cultura occidentale è alla base della tradizione incentrata sul carattere perituro della bellezza estetica.

7 Per quello che riguarda l’intreccio tra biologia e scienze della vita, già nell’ottocento osserviamo una volontà di confronto sul confine tra le singole discipline. Uno degli esempi più evidenti è la teoria del romanzo sperimentale di Émile Zola, ispirata dagli studi di medicina sperimentale del suo contemporaneo Claude Bernard.

8 I saggi raccolti da Pinotti e Tedesco (*Estetica e scienze della vita*) si riferiscono alla biologia teoretica (per esempio di von Uexküll, von Weizsäcker, etc.).

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1 For further discussion on the vicious attacks on Said, and by implication Palestine and Palestinians in mainstream media in the USA see, for example, Barat More-Gilbert’s *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture Politics and Self-Representation* (2009) and Cynthia Franklin’s *Academic Lives: Memoir, Cultural Theory, and the Universities Today* (2009), see Edward Said’s rebuttal in “Defamation, Zionist Style” (1999).

2 The novella is about Norbert Hanold’s fascination with the figure of a woman he has seen for the first time in a bas-relief in a museum in Rome. He has named her Gradiva and has become convinced that it must be found in Pompeii, the city he studied as an archeologist. In his dream he is transported to Pompeii during the eruption of Vesuvius in 97 BC where he sees Gradiva walking towards the temple of Apollo. Convinced with her real existence, he leaves Germany to Pompeii and starts looking for her in the ruins. One day he sees Gradiva and when following her, he discovers that she is Zoe Bertgang, his childhood friend.
Opere citate, Œuvres citées,
Zitierte Literatur; Works Cited


