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**“Unanswered Questions / Unquestioned Answers”: Trauma
and the Palestinian Experience in Betty Shamieh’s The Black
Eyed (2005)**

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Abstract

Recently, trauma attracts much attention and becomes a pivotal subject connecting so many disciplines. Hence, the psychoanalytic concept of trauma intersects with literature, literary theory, historiography and contemporary culture. The aim of this paper is to apply trauma theory on a number of Palestinian historical female figures who suffer from different traumatic experiences as a result of violence, terrorism, politics and cultural myths with special reference to Betty Shamieh’s The Black Eyed (2005). This study is an interdisciplinary approach that argues for a more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma theory in order to respond more adequately to feminist postcolonial ways of understanding history, memory and culture. In addition, it investigates why trauma calls out for testimony and why testimony is one of the viable and vital responses to trauma. The Black Eyed focuses on the oppression practiced over the people of Palestine throughout history. It also challenges the popular cultural myths surrounding Arab-American women living in the United States, focusing on the struggle of the Arab-Americans after 9/11. Delineating complex female characters, Shamieh .asserts their own individual identities through their traumatic experiences

Key words: Trauma – Palestinian experience – history – oppression – politics – terrorism – violence – cultural myths – postcolonial feminism.

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Recently, trauma attracts much attention and becomes a pivotal subject connecting so many disciplines. Hence, the psychoanalytic concept of trauma intersects with literature, literary theory, historiography and contemporary culture. In a modern era that is full of terror and violence, the study of the theory of trauma is essential. Many critics and thinkers perceive the Twentieth century as a “post-traumatic century” because of the two World Wars and the following recent wars worldwide.

The aim of this paper is to apply trauma theory on a number of Palestinian historical female figures who suffer from different traumatic experiences as a result of violence, terrorism, politics and cultural myths with special reference to Betty Shamieh’s The Black Eyed (2005). This study is an interdisciplinary approach that argues for a more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma theory in order to respond more adequately to feminist postcolonial ways of understanding history, memory and culture. In addition, it investigates why trauma calls out for testimony and why testimony is one of the viable and vital responses to trauma. The Black Eyed focuses on the oppression practiced over the people of Palestine throughout history. It also challenges the popular cultural myths surrounding Arab-American women living in the United States, focusing on the struggle of the Arab-Americans after 9/11. Delineating complex female characters, Shamieh asserts their own individual identities through their traumatic experiences.

The political incidents of 9/11 urged playwrights, with Arab or Arab-American backgrounds, to challenge many misconceptions around their

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own culture and identity. Arab-American women playwrights recognized their responsibility to reclaim and reconstruct the cultural and historical interpretations of their own works. Betty Shamieh (1979 –) is a young contemporary female Palestinian-American playwright who attempts to draw the attention of the West to the dilemma of Palestine. She is basically concerned about representing drama that portrays cultural, historical and political issues that provide assumptions about Palestinian women and Palestinian history. Through the framework of literary trauma theory, she is able to engage her audience with complex political postcolonial representations of her Palestinian people. She creates her own vision of the Palestinian history by relocating her female figures into historical narratives and re-estimating their role in historical context. Her play The Black Eyed is a poetic non-linear drama, written in free verse with a chorus. It is Shamieh’s most politically saturated work, modifying political, historical and biblical narratives in order to challenge the visibility of the Palestinian woman in a post 9/11 world.

In order to analyze Shamieh’s The Black Eyed with reference to the literary theory of trauma, it is important to shed light on the origin of the theory, its definition and how to try to get over its drastic consequences. The trauma theory goes originally back to medicine but it was articulated into the humanities during the 90s through its leading founders of the first wave of literary trauma theorists such as Geoffrey Hartman, Soshana Felman ,and the most importantly, Professor Cathy Caruth. She coined the term ‘Literary Trauma Theory’ that helped in conceptualizing what is known today in literature as ‘Trauma.’

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The term ‘trauma’ comes from the Greek word ‘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, p.4). This may include a severe personal experience such as the death of a loved one or being exposed to sexual violence. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association defined this long ignored phenomenon as ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD) “which included the symptoms of what had previously been called Shell-Shock, Combat Stress, Delayed Stress Syndrome, and Traumatic Neurosis that referred to responses both human and natural catastrophes” (Caruth ,1995, p.3). In fact, there are responses or symptoms after being exposed to a traumatic event such as repeated dreams, hallucinations, horrifying thoughts and behaviour...etc.

In fact, the term ‘trauma’ does not refer to the traumatic experience itself but rather to the post-traumatic aftermath with its symptoms and terrible consequences. According to Burstow, trauma is a “reaction to a kind of wound. It is a reaction to profoundly injurious events and situations in the real world and, indeed, to a world in which people are routinely wounded”(2003, p.1302).Hence, traumatizing sociopolitical circumstances should be part of understanding and addressing of people’s psycho-social problems.

In her well known book Unclaimed Experience , Cathy Caruth defines ‘Literary Trauma’ as :

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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, p.4)

Similarly, Fassin and Rechtman give a concise account of the notion of ‘trauma’ as follows :

Trauma has become a major signifier of our age. It is our normal means of relating present suffering to past violence. It is the scar that a tragic event leaves on an individual victim or on a witness. Sometimes even on the perpetrator. It is also the collective imprint on a group of a historical experience that may have occurred decades, generations or even centuries ago. (2009, p.xi)

This definition highlights one of the main concepts of trauma by Caruth which is ‘trans-historical trauma’. It argues that “traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable, yet it is also literal, contagious, and mummified event (Balaev, 2008, p.151). Caruth asserts that “the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (1996, p.2).

Caruth also adds that trauma “is never simply one’s own [but] precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (1996, p.24), thus

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suggesting that trauma is contagious. Therefore, Caruth, among other literary critics, believes that traumatic events can be trans-historically transmitted across generational gaps by oral or written actions. Kirby Farrell concludes that any traumatic experience can be exchanged between people based on social factors: one’s ethnic, racial , sexual or economic background, thus leading to the emergence of a “post-traumatic culture(1998, p.3).

Balaev gives a very accurate definition of ‘trans-historical trauma’:

[A] massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory. (2008, p.152)

As a result, trauma narratives have the ability to recreate the traumatic experience for those who were historically absent. This is the reason behind how a specific group can shape their cultural identity through shared history. This 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

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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 interpreted 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, p.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 elucidates that the traumatized figure brings into awareness the specific nature of individual trauma that is often interrelated to larger social and cultural ideologies. Trauma literature introduces an image of the individual that suffers, but presents it so as to indicate that this figure is an ‘every person’ figure. Balaev adds:

[A] significant purpose of the protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race, or gender, have collectively experienced massive trauma. In this regard, the fictional figure magnifies a historical event in which thousands or millions of people have suffered a similar violence. (2008, p.155)

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Shamieh’s The Black Eyed is representative of trauma theory that is utilized as a powerful indicator of oppressive political and cultural regimes and practices. She also introduces other types of trauma in her play: personal or psychological trauma and political or cultural trauma. According to Horvitz, psychological trauma is a “sodomasochistic violence against a designated victim, who is personally known by [his] assailant”(2000, p.11) whereas 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 goals of the existing hegemony, are tortured, imprisoned or killed” (2000, p.11).

Jeffrey Alexander believes that cultural trauma takes place when members of collectivity are subjected to a violent event that leaves unforgettable marks upon their collective consciousness, marking their memories and changing their future identity fundamentally (2004, p.1). He adds that traumas do not exist naturally but they are “constructed by society” (2004, p.2). Neal further clarifies that collective traumas in which national and cultural traumas are subcategories that have an “explosive quality... creating disruption and radical change within a short period of time” (1998, p.9–10). Kai Erikson fully explains the distinction between individual and collective traumas:

By individual trauma, I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively ... By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues

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of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness to those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with ‘trauma’. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared ... “We” no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (1978, p.153-4)

In addition to these two types, there is a third one which is called ‘insidious trauma’. It is defined by Jenzen as the conceptualization of everyday life oppressive experiences as traumatic events (2010, p.4). He explains that forms of insidious trauma include “living in severe poverty, or the impact of racism, colonialism, and homophobia” (2010, p.4). In fact, the Palestinian history during the Israeli’s occupation is considered a paradigm of political or cultural trauma. With its accumulated everyday forms of violence and oppression, the Israeli’s occupation of Palestine marks a striking example of insidious trauma.

Shamieh exploits memory to go back to the same events that are the reason behind the occurrence of trauma. Like all Palestinians, she has to cope with the trauma of her people that delves deep into every aspect of their public and personal lives. Her play The Black Eyed mirrors her consciousness of the great impact of trauma on the individual and

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society. Like all her people, her main concern is to liberate the land of her ancestors and to restore it. Edward Said confirms this belief saying: “the insistence on the right to see the community’s history whole ... restore the imprisoned nation to itself” (1994, p.259). Similarly, 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, p.121).

For Caruth, trauma is an intense experience that the mind cannot process normally. In its immediate aftermath, the traumatized victim may be unable to remember the painful event. If he can recall memories of trauma, they are often non-verbal and he sometimes cannot describe them in words. Yet, Caruth believes that figural and imaginative literature can ‘speak’ trauma while literal discursive language cannot. Pederson adds that Caruth maintains that “fiction helps give a voice to traumatized individuals and populations. Hence, her theory of trauma is a ringing endorsement of the testimonial power of literature” (2014, p.334).

Though her description of trauma indicates her debt to Freud, Caruth constructs her literary theory of trauma on the work of contemporary psychologists and psychiatrists, most prominently Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk. Their work directly supports Caruth’s beliefs that trauma is amnesic and unspeakable. Her critical edifice has long been resistant to criticism because she builds her literary theory on a scientific basis, giving an everlasting use value to her system.

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In fact, Caruth shares her belief of the amnesic quality of trauma with van der Kolk. He bases his notion on the observation of Pierre Janet about the resistance of the brain to ‘register’ the traumatic event:

When people feel threatened, they experience a significant narrowing of consciousness, and remain focused on only the central perceptual details. As people are being traumatized, this narrowing of consciousness sometimes seems to evolve into a complete amnesia for the experience. More than 85 years ago, Janet (1909) claimed: “Forgetting the event which precipitated the emotion ... has frequently been found to accompany intense emotional experiences in the form of continuous and retrograde amnesia.” (1996, p.285)

Similarly, the works of both van der Kolk and Herman support Caruth’s assertion that trauma is unspeakable. She develops it in her discussion of Freud in her book Unclaimed Experience, based on what Herman mentioned in her book Trauma and Recovery. Herman describes the difficulties that victims confront when they are asked to face their traumatic experience for the first time in therapy: “[A]s the [therapeutic] narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, the patient finds it more and more difficult to use words. At times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting” (1992, p.177). As a result, Caruth holds on her claim that trauma victims cannot explain their own traumas verbally.

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However, more recent studies of the psychology of trauma have challenged Caruth’s claims. In 2003, Harvard’s Richard McNally released his book Remembering Trauma, after long exhausting research, in which he argues that traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while traumatized victims may choose to speak about their traumatic experience, there is little evidence they cannot. Accordingly, Pederson confirms that “while its importance for the field of psychology is crucial, McNally’s research also lays the groundwork for a critique of Caruth’s literary trauma theory” (2010, p. 334). As his edifice unfolds, McNally gives convincing refutations about the two most crucial tenets of Caruth’s literary theory of trauma: traumatic memories are both ‘unclaimed’ or ‘unregistered’ and they elude direct verbal representation.

McNally argues that van der Kolk’s notion of traumatic amnesia is not supported by empirical studies. McNally states that “[N]euroscience research does not support van der Kolk’s claim that high levels of stress hormones impair memory for traumatic experience” (2003, p.180). Therefore, McNally believes that victims may not think frequently about the trauma they suffer. “However,” he continues:

one cannot conclude that a person who does not think about something for a long period of time – who has ‘forgotten’ it, in everyday parlance – is suffering from amnesia. Amnesia is an inability to recall information that has been encoded. We cannot assume that people have been unable to recall their abuse during the years when they did not think about it. (2003, p.184)

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Similarly, McNally stands against studies that claim that some victims have forgotten the circumstances of their abuse. Actually, researchers fail to corroborate the claims of some victims that the abuse occurred. Knowing that confessions of abuse are revealed in group therapy sessions, McNally argues that “social pressure to come up with abuse memories might have fostered formulation of illusory memories of events that never happened” (2003, p.200). In fact, McNally does not ignore the reality of abuse, but he doubts that any victim can suffer a total amnesia of his abuse. He contends that the claims of his opponents are insupportable since “[W]e can never ‘prove a negative’ – prove that the information is not available in the person’s memory” (2003, p.184).

In brief, amnesia cannot be extrapolated from a victim’s understandable desire not to think of a painful experience. On the contrary, McNally cites researches that suggest that the victim’s memory for trauma is actually enhanced. He concludes: “It is ironic that so much has been written about the biological mechanisms of traumatic psychological amnesia when the very existence of the phenomenon is in doubt. What we have here is a set of theories in search of a phenomenon” (2003, p.182).

Moreover, the contemporary critic Professor Pederson argues that traumatic amnesia is potentially harmful:

The possibility of traumatic amnesia can be frightening for victims; if such forgetting is possible, an ominous memory lurks behind every bad mood, and the return of the repressed is a

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menacing possibility. An unremembered trauma is an event over which the victim has virtually no control, and admitting the possibility of total traumatic amnesia (or over-emphasizing its power or prevalence) steals agency from the survivor. (2014, p.338)

McNally also doubts the idea that traumatic memory cannot be expressed in words. According to van der Kolk, the traumatized individual cannot maintain a narrative or a verbal memory of his or her trauma. He adds that victims may recall their traumas through flashbacks or dreams but they are unable to speak about them. McNally disagrees, again citing several studies by other specialists for support:

Contrary to van der Kolk’s theory, trauma does not block the formation of narrative memory. That memory for trauma can be expressed as physiologic reactivity to traumatic reminders does not preclude its being expressed in narrative as well. As Lawrence Langer (1991) has thoroughly documented, survivors of the Nazi 180Holocaust readily provide detailed narrative accounts of their horrific experiences. (2003, p.180)

A traumatized person may not want to speak of his or her trauma, but this does not give the researcher the right to call this reluctance an inability to speak. In fact, McNally argues that the trauma memory may be altered, but he rejects the notion that it is absent :

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[P]eople who have experienced harrowingly close brushes with death (such as falling off a mountain) often report extreme dissociative alterations of consciousness (time slowing down, everything seeming unreal), yet they remain fully capable of providing detailed accounts of their experiences. (2003, p.182)

After reading McNally, it is important to pinpoint the fact that Caruth’s theory of trauma is under critical reassessment. Trends of contemporary psychological research suggest that traumatic memories are both memorable and speakable. In The Black Eyed, Shamieh’s four female figures are able to remember their traumatic past and they actually relate their traumatic experiences in full details.

Susan Brison, herself a victim of trauma, states that the narratives of trauma victims have a healing power. Speaking trauma drags it from the realm of painful obscurity and accelerates the process of rehabilitation:

In contrast to the involuntary experiencing of traumatic memories, narrating memories to others ... enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma. Narrative memory is not passively endured; rather, it is an act on the part of the narrator, a speech act that defuses traumatic memory, giving shape and a temporal order to the events recalled, establishing more control over their recalling, and helping the survivor to remake a self. (2002, p.71)

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If trauma victims cannot accurately testify to their own pain, they are actually both disempowered and deprived of a crucial tool for healing.

After examining numerous studies supporting the theory of heightened traumatic memory, McNally concludes that “emotional stress enhances memory for the central features of the stressful experience. Stress does not impair memory; it strengthens it” (2003, p.62). Traumatic memories, then, are not hindered or banished. On the contrary, they are potentially more powerful and more detailed than normal ones. This may lead literary critics to be open to the idea that authors may describe traumatic experiences with excessive detail and vibrant intensity. In fact, trauma does not efface memory but it may wrap it.

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

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of Palestine itself through history. 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... (Shamieh, 2005, p.1)

Shamieh begins her play with questions that evoke 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 led 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 who reflects her Palestinian heritage and the traumatic effects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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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. Samson was the strongest Israeli man who killed hundreds of Palestinians daily. The men in her tribe manipulated Delilah to seduce Samson in order 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.

They were polite. (Shamieh , 2005 , p.13)

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

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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 , p. 13)

As a result, Delilah suffers from both personal and political traumas. 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 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 conflict led to bloodshed from that early period. Consequently, highlighting the history of both the Palestinian people and Israelis is meant, by Shamieh, to be closely related to the oppression and bloodshed taking place in Palestine nowadays.

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Tamam speaks second. She 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 , p.40)

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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, p.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. She recalls the massacre:

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 , p.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

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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. She belongs to the 20th century. Today, Palestine is still suffering due to the Arab-Israeli conflict. 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, p.45)

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It is obvious that the Israeli occupation increases the level of violence, hatred and oppression in the Palestinian society. Aeisha is a symbolic figure that stands for the oppression of the Israeli occupation. She 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 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 is the last to speak. She is a nameless modern woman who belongs to the 21st century. She is only identified as the Architect. She is 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. She experiences both personal and cultural traumas. She suffers from lack of assimilation inside the American society. 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. She loses her living soul into a world of fantasy and daydreaming:

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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, p. 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. 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, p. 27).

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In the afterlife, all the four women are still standing at the door of the martyr’s room: Delilah is looking for Samson; Tamam is searching for her brother; Aiesha wants to enter and finally the Architect wants to meet her plane hijacker. The stories of these female figures are highly significant as they delve deep into the human psyche and they try to bring to the surface the reasons behind their traumas as one step forward in the process of healing from their traumatic experiences.

One way out of the closed circle of one’s psyche is to be capable of telling one’s story – to construct a narrative – so as to re-externalize any painful event as one step towards a therapeutic process. In writing The Black Eyed, Shamieh expands her readers’ consciousness of trauma by engaging them in different historical narratives in order to highlight the painful ambivalence characterizing traumatic memory. In this way, she attempts to reshape cultural memory through personal contexts, using testimonial traits to bear witness of such dreadful incidents. In fact, trauma calls out for testimony as it is one of the viable and vital responses to trauma. Shamieh tries to attract the world’s attention to the plight of the Palestinian people. She is fully aware that the Palestinian memory is totally based on “oral history unlike the Israeli historical memory that is almost totally based on documents” (Nets-Zehngut, 2011, p. 272). As a result, The Black Eyed is considered as a historical documentation in which Shamieh records neglected historical catastrophes and gives voice to previously unheard historical narratives.

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Narrating one’s traumatic experience is a very crucial step in the healing process. Dori Laub confirms that survivors of trauma “did not only need to survive so that they could tell stories, they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive (1992, p.78). Healing from trauma can be achieved through the mechanism of ‘bearing witness’. According to Freud, the function of bearing witness is “[d]escriptively speaking, it is to fill in gaps in memory; dynamically speaking, it is to overcome resistance due to repression” (1914,p.148). Similarly, Horvitz asserts that testimony is required to both resist and bear witness to cultural repression (2000, p.2).

According to Zelizer, bearing witness is one way of overcoming the difficulties that result from going through a traumatic experience by bringing trauma victims together on their way to collective therapy (2002, p.2). She asserts that bearing witness transfers individuals from a personal act to a public stance by which they become part of a group working through to recover from trauma together (2000, p.2). Hence, it becomes a means of recovery that has a tremendous healing power over traumatized people. In The Black Eyed, bearing witness is actually a tool of resistance which Shamieh utilizes to register Palestinian history. She focuses on transferring, to contemporary generations, a past that has been intentionally erased and suppressed by the false dominant narrative. She excels in revealing the devastating consequences of trauma either personal or cultural on the psyche. She believes that by removing social repression and regaining memory, her People can restore their collective psychological health. In fact, bearing witness in Shamieh’s The Black

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Eyed, is not only an act of narration but also a commitment towards others to narrate history truthfully.

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, p. 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, p. 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:

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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, what they believed,

What they feared even as they raped me, ...

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, p. 48)

In fact, Tamam represents the image of Palestine that had been raped by the Crusades during that period of time. 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

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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, p.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, p. 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’:

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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, p. 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.

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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, p.66), shedding light on the 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:

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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, p.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

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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, p.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, literary theory of trauma has been utilized in the analysis of the literary works of postcolonial fiction. Whitehead

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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, p.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

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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.

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, p.37). Then the Chorus comments: “Why do our people rejoice when a boy child is born?” (Shamieh, 2005, p.37). In fact, Shamieh rejects all forms of discrimination against women like neglect, better feeding of boys than girls, less education for girls than boys....etc.

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

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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 and Yemen...etc.

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?

.....

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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, p.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

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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, p.82)

Accordingly, Shamieh excels in justifying her aim of writing her play The Black Eyed that she mentioned earlier. She skillfully directs these questions to America and the Arab countries. She repeatedly declares her rejection of violence and oppression, asserting that killing each other is in vain. On the contrary, it complicates problems more. It becomes more devastating and traumatizing. She believes that the endless Palestinian-Israeli struggle cannot be resolved through violence and bloodshed. Millions of innocent people lose their lives in a useless everlasting conflict. The means of violence and oppression may change throughout history but the traumatic pain and memory they inflict remain the same. It is coherent that Shamieh is not taking the side of Palestine as her mother country. She actually wants her voice to reach people who are for or against Israel. She dreams of a peaceful means that would stop discrimination and terror against both her mother country and the ethnic minorities like her in the United States. Shamieh also hopes that one day Palestine shall live in peace.

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In conclusion, Shamieh’s poetic drama The Black Eyed is considered her most complex vivid work. It succeeds in delineating four Palestinian women from different historical periods, anticipating their outcomes in the afterlife. This research paper examines how Betty Shamieh excels in applying literary trauma theory on four female historical figures who suffer from different traumatizing experiences as a result of being exposed to all forms of violence, terrorism and oppression throughout the Palestinian history. Shamieh succeeds in attempting to heal herself and her people from both the personal and cultural traumas that they suffer from through the power of testimony and the healing technique of ‘bearing witness’. She utilizes narrative memory as a tool of resistance against the useless trials on the part of the Israeli regime to erase the Palestinian history. 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 women 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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