

Commemorating Violence as Therapy for Trauma in the Post-Civil War Anglophone Lebanese Novel

Pamela Layoun
Holy Spirit University of Kaslik - Lebanon

pamelalayoun@usek.edu.lb

Abstract:

In the period extending from 1975 to 1990, Lebanon entered a very dark phase in its history, as it became the battlefield of clashing communities and factions. The end of the war invited a willing erasure of fifteen years of violence from the national consciousness of Lebanese people leaving them burdened with the heavy weight of trauma. As the government deliberately refuses to keep the memory of the War alive, the novels written in the postwar period by contemporary immigrant Anglophone Lebanese writers seek to pull the bloody events out of amnesia and offer the Lebanese people the possibility to deal with their trauma publicly by coming face to face with the violence they had to endure.

Key-words: Violence; Trauma; Lebanese War; Public Memory, Therapy

On the morning of April 13, 1975, a series of violent clashes led to the eruption of a war which dragged the nation of Lebanon into a whirlwind of bloody events spanning fifteen years. The War of 1975 left its scars on the national, political, social, and cultural map of Lebanon to such an extent that it still haunts the collective memory of a generation of Lebanese people who had to make a choice between witnessing violence on a daily basis and immigrating to peaceful foreign countries. Forty years later, the Lebanese Civil War still fails to appear in national history books. In fact, there is no general consensus among the Lebanese people about a unified historical narrative that explains the origins, the course, and the repercussions of the Civil War. In addition, the Lebanese government's conscious decision to foster the culture of amnesia among war survivors, lest the already-fragile-communal peace be broken, has created an inimical hindrance to proper national healing. Thus, the controversy surrounding the events that provoked the War has rendered its commemoration a private, rather than a public, issue. Yet, since 1990, the year that marked the end of the War, individual immigrant Lebanese writers have written fiction in English which directly addresses the violence of the War and its traumatizing effects in an effort to pull it out of oblivion. As Lebanese authors writing from the Anglophone homes that hosted them, they fictionalized their own experiences, as well as the experiences of many other Lebanese survivors of the War, by creating protagonists who are deeply stigmatized by violence and trauma. By exploring violence and examining the impact of trauma on shaping the lives of the protagonists, the post-Civil War Anglophone Lebanese novel observes the duty of remembrance so that the healing process can be completed and Lebanese people can move on by reclaiming their collective identity as traumatized subjects.

THE CIVIL WAR IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE LEBANESE WRITING

Anglophone Lebanese literature emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Writers who immigrated to the U.S.A. became particularly notable for their Arabic and English works which dealt with the themes of exile, nostalgia for the homeland, and the opposition between the material West and the spiritual East. Thus, Ameen Rihani, Kahlil Gibran, Mikhail Naimy, and other *émigré* writers formed a new literary movement that was known as the Mahjar (or emigrant) movement in Arabic literature. While early Anglophone Lebanese literature has received considerable

scholarly attention, the works of contemporary Anglophone Lebanese writers have not been examined extensively¹. Writing from different Anglophone homes, contemporary writers like Rabih Alameddine², Dimitri Nasrallah³, and Rawi Hage⁴ published their works independently using writing techniques such as narrative interruption and fragmentation to reflect the chaotic and violent world of the Lebanese Civil War, a theme that constitutes a common denominator in all their novels, and expose language's limitations of expressing trauma. The cited authors were inspired by their own experiences of the Civil War to create characters who struggle to express and come to terms with their personal traumas. In *Healing Trauma, Preventing Violence*, Mark Bracher explains that when individuals acknowledge their traumas and are allowed to restore their traumatized identities, they become less vulnerable to the traumatic experience (Bracher, 2004: 516). To acknowledge the existence of the psychological wound is, therefore, therapeutic. In this manner, as the protagonists in the novels seek recognition of the violence they were subjected to, they form a microcosm of a nation in need of recognition of the occurrence of the War – one that is only available in literature, movies, photography, and painting – to overcome its trauma. It is worth mentioning that contemporary Arabic Lebanese novels⁵ and Francophone Lebanese novels⁶ also use the Civil War as an essential backdrop to the plot. However, this article's aim is to shed light on a less acknowledged literary category that thrived at the turn of the twenty-first century in a language that is neither native nor colonial⁷. In fact, the selected authors simply express themselves in the language of the host country that provided them with shelter and address their novels to audiences inside and outside Lebanon. Thus, not only do they ensure that the new generation of Lebanese readers do not forget that obliterated part of their history, but they also sensitize the readers in the host country to understand their history as they would like to recount it through their protagonists.

THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL AS HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

Contemporary Anglophone Lebanese novels of the postwar period, such as *I, the Divine* (2001)⁸ by Alameddine, *Blackbodying* (2004)⁹ by Nasrallah, and *Cockroach* (2008)¹⁰ by Hage portray Lebanese protagonists from different religious, political, and socio-cultural backgrounds, who unanimously describe the explosion of bombs that would keep them awake at night, the survival of Lebanese people in the shelters, the massacres in the city of Damour and the Palestinian camps of Sabra and Shatila, the kidnappings, and the infamous war practices of militiamen. The common memories of violence they share allow readers to consider post-Civil War Anglophone Lebanese novels as possible historical narratives presenting a collective memory of the War. To French sociologist Roger Bastide, «collective memory is not an ideal entity with an existence of its own. Collective memory is the end result of that certain exchange relationship, which takes place within a social grouping – exchange of information, memories, values – between the individuals who compose the group» (Haugbolle, 2002: 15). The protagonists' individual accounts or 'private' memories of violent events unite to form a shared or 'public' memory of the War. In this manner, the protagonists' own individual experiences become part of a collectively constructed past. As Paula Hamilton explains in her article *A Long War: Public Memory and the Popular Media*,

in order for personal memories to become part of a wider collective phenomenon, individual experience is necessarily transfigured and is therefore always "more than" individual. Public memory, in this sense, refers to a past that is both commonly shared and collectively commemorated—these should not be understood as the same activities—though, of course, not one necessarily shared by all people, unambiguously, in any particular collectivity. (Hamilton, 2010: 300)

Thus, memory may shift from the private to the public domain in literature, and the post-Civil War Anglophone Lebanese novel constitutes a common space that allows its authors to commemorate the war publicly rather than privately. In fact, the novels become a forum where writers can discuss violence and reflect on its effects without censorship. The public commemoration of the Civil War

¹ Syrine Hout's *Post-war Anglophone Lebanese Fiction: Home Matters in the Diaspora* (2012) finally made the effort.

² Alameddine is an American-Lebanese writer, who was seventeen when he left his war-torn homeland of Lebanon to pursue his studies in the United States.

³ Nasrallah is a Canadian-Lebanese writer, who was born in Lebanon during the Civil War. His family went into exile when he was only four and moved between Kuwait, Dubai, and Greece, before they finally settled in Canada.

⁴ Hage is a Canadian-Lebanese writer, who was born in Beirut and lived through nine years of the Civil War before moving to New York City and subsequently to Canada.

⁵ See Tawfiq Yusuf Awad's *Death in Beirut* (1972), Elias Khoury's *The Little Mountain* (1977) or Hoda Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter* (1990).

⁶ See Andrée Chedid's *L'Enfant Multiple* (1989) or Alexandre Najjar's *L'école de la Guerre* (1999).

⁷ Lebanon was under a French mandate from 1920 to 1943.

⁸ *I, the Divine* tells the story of Sarah Nour El-Din, the daughter of a Lebanese doctor and an American actress, who attempts to pen her traumatic experience of the Civil War and surviving rape with great difficulty. After a failed marriage, she finally decides to live in exile in the U.S.A. deeming that she cannot return to Beirut because it holds very dark memories.

⁹ *Blackbodying* features two novels. The main narrator, who grows up in Greece listening to his parents' stories about the war, becomes a writer in Canada and takes the readers through the drafting of his first novella, *A Canadian Fiction*. Sameer, the protagonist of the novella, flees the war in Lebanon leaving his wife and children behind in the hope that they join him later. Upon his arrival in Canada, he grows extremely isolated, a state which is only aggravated, as he wakes up one morning completely paralyzed.

¹⁰ *Cockroach* captures the futile life of a nameless narrator who is unable to integrate his newfound Canadian society or relate back to the mother country. Haunted by the war in the homeland and the traumatic death of his sister, he is highly insecure. He eventually sympathizes with Shohreh, his Iranian lover, and decides to help her assassinate her former torturer in an attempt to reach a closure.

in literature entails the existence of a shared history, a sense of collective identity which is denied to the Lebanese people because they were not allowed to recognize themselves as traumatized subjects.

I, THE DIVINE: A FRAGMENTED NOVEL

In the post-Civil War Anglophone Lebanese novel, the protagonists not only describe general occurrences of violence during the war, but they also detail the episodes of violence that they had to endure on a personal level. The details are not readily divulged, for the protagonists experience great difficulty in talking about and surmounting their personal traumas. In fact, as Cathy Caruth deduces from her readings of Sigmund Freud's texts, the wound is «inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind» (Caruth, 2010: *Introduction*). While the body may heal from trauma with time, the mind remains permanently scarred. According to Janet Walker, in her article *The Traumatic Paradox*, trauma appears in various forms, but, in any case, it is always generated by violence:

Traumatic events that are experienced directly include, but are not limited to, military combat, violent personal assault (sexual assault, physical attack, robbery, mugging), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war or in a concentration camp, natural or manmade disasters, severe automobile accidents, or being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. (Walker, 2003: 106)

Violence and trauma are, then, two sides of the same coin, as the former leads to the emergence of the latter.

In *I, the Divine*, Alameddine's protagonist, Sarah, is not only a victim of war but also a victim of rape, an event that marks her entire life. Disturbed by the innocent fireworks that celebrate the Fourth of July, she exhibits PTSD, an acronym for post-traumatic stress disorder, as she «goes under the covers, just like she used to do in Beirut when it got too noisy, too violent» (Alameddine, 2001: 92). Introduced in the early 1980s, the term PTSD designates the mental condition of traumatized subjects who suffer from «reexperiencing of trauma ('intrusion'), avoidance phenomena ('numbness'), and hyperarousal/hyperactivity, which can all involve elements of depression, anxiety, panic attacks, flashbacks, startle reactions, and survivor guilt» (Dean, 1997: 42). As Sarah embarks on several attempts to write her memoir, she clearly manifests PTSD through her inability to confront the painful memory of gang rape and put it down on paper. Her attempts are constantly aborted and her first chapters, which are left incomplete, are characterized by shifts in narrative style and point of view, fragmentation, and interruptions. After she fails to voice her trauma in English, she unsuccessfully tries to begin her memoir in French, only to realize that language itself cannot adequately express her pain or reproduce the exact traumatic moment. As Caruth explains, «[t]he accident [...] does not simply represent the violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility» (Caruth, 2010: *Introduction*). Sarah, therefore, provides the readers with textual fragments of herself, which reflect her inability to shape her life and identity coherently. In the process, she reveals a mind that is desperate to understand what happened but is unable to. In *Contested Pasts*, Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone clarify:

Following a terrible event, it suggests, memory goes into crisis, and refuses the knowledge of what has happened. The theoretical crux is the idea of something that cannot be thought, that is inaccessibly closed to memory, because the psychic wound inflicted by the event was intolerable. Thus the notion of trauma complicates referentiality by interposing the disruptions of memory between the event and its representations. (Hodgkin - Radstone, 2003: 6)

In fact, Sarah eventually succeeds in textually representing the rape episode when she creates a distance between the event and herself. Abandoning first-person narration in favor of third-person narration, she is able to describe how she wanted to die rather than to suffer what the men wanted to inflict on her, how they addressed her with a heap of insults, how they violently penetrated her, and how

she «closed her eyes, out of pain, out of bitterness, out of shame» (Alameddine, 2001: 197). Although the act of writing down her trauma frees her, Sarah remains adamant that time is not really a great healer, as they say, as it can neither obliterate memory nor sublimate passion (Alameddine, 2001: 101). Through this statement, Alameddine reminds his countrymen that forgetfulness does not heal war trauma. Remembering or confronting the traumatic event, on the other hand, may be therapeutic rather than destructive. As Bracher states, «[i]t is the lack of recognition embodied in violence that makes violence itself traumatic» (Bracher, 2004: 520). Therefore, it is only when the protagonists, and by extension, the Lebanese people, acknowledge openly that they were the victims of violence that they are able to heal trauma.

BLACKBODYING: A METAFICTION

Taken in its simplistic form, the much debated theory of repression by Freud applies to the general postwar attitude in Lebanon which sought to prevent the memory of the Civil War from surfacing in the national consciousness. Unsolicited memories of violence, however, cannot be maintained in the dark for the long term. In her article *Remembering Obligation: Witnessing Testimonies of Historical Trauma*, Claudia Eppert draws a clear example of the interplay between amnesia and remembrance: «In their shock and extremity of horror, such events impel a forgetfulness or displacement at the same time that they repeatedly return on emotional and ethical terms for private and public consideration» (Eppert, 2005: 51). Recovery from trauma cannot rely on forgetfulness and recollection as mutually exclusive, since both dynamics of memory are necessary for survival in the present. Consequently, Lebanese writers and artists refuse to be granted the right of forgetfulness and denied the right of remembrance, without which national healing cannot take place. In fact, Syrine Hout, a Lebanese scholar who has examined Anglophone Lebanese fiction extensively, condemns the pretense that nothing happened as «self-induced post-traumatic amnesia, whose suppression of painful facts prohibits long-term reconciliation» (Hout, 2008: 62). As such, the post-Civil War Anglophone Lebanese novel protects the memory of the War against imposed amnesia to allow old and new generations of Lebanese people to make peace with the past and come to terms with the violence that lasted for fifteen years.

Nasrallah's *Blackbodying* is a perfect example of a novel within a novel, which features two narrators: an unnamed Lebanese writer and the protagonist of his novel, Sameer Gerdak. An immigrant himself, the unnamed narrator introduces his readers to an unstable childhood spent between Greece and Canada after his parents escape the War in Lebanon. As an adult, his first fiction attempts to recreate the atrocities of the Civil War and depict the hardships that accompany an immigrant's life through his main character, Sameer. Drawing attention to the act of creating fiction, Nasrallah's novel engages himself in «[a] kind of double telling» (Caruth, 2010: *Introduction*), and so the first narrator appears to be the alter ego of the other. As the unnamed narrator struggles to come to terms with a traumatic childhood, Sameer seems to reflect every immigrant's conflict: «the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival» (Caruth, 2010: *Introduction*). In fact, he leaves his wife and children in native Lebanon to take up a job as a taxi driver in Canada, yet he gradually begins to exhibit feelings of guilt at having survived the War when his family stop showing any sign of life. In addition to feeling guilty, he remains stuck in the violent past amid a relatively stable present. For example, when a suspicious passenger assails him and beats him violently, he falls into a deep coma during which the suppressed memory of the violence he escaped in the homeland floats back to the surface:

Our neighbour, next door, was beaten to death by a group of fourteen-year-old boys, first for his money, which they would use to buy guns, and then for his beliefs. His head was driven repeatedly against the wall until he was no longer recognizable. We huddled in a corner and listened. Najwa tried to cover the ears of both our sons but did not have enough hands. No matter. His screams were unavoidable. My children

refused to sleep thereafter. No loss. Nobody worried about sleep any more. (Nasrallah, 2004: 189)

Delving in Sameer's unconscious mind allows the manifestation of a repressed traumatic event, whose intensity may only be reduced once it finds a voice in his conscious mind. As Sameer writes letters to his unresponsive wife, he begins to voice his trauma in writing like Sarah, Alameddine's protagonist, does when she writes her memoir, and so the act of writing is viewed as a therapeutic activity. In fact, «[w]riting in itself implies distance from trauma; for once something is written down, the effort to remember it decreases» (Hout, 2008: 61). Resorting to metafiction, the unnamed narrator is able to distance himself and make his readers aware that Sameer's traumatized identity, though fictitious, is, in reality, his own personal identity. In the end, remembering violence forces the protagonists to re-experience violence; however, the present helps to create a distance from the past, as it paradoxically provides them with the power and freedom to confront their traumas as victims and come to terms with it as survivors.

INTRUSIVE FLASHBACKS IN *COCKROACH*

Exposing one's vulnerability to a painful past memory is not an easy process, as it requires acknowledgment of the traumatic event on the part of the victim. In Hage's *Cockroach*, the unnamed protagonist experiences the same difficulty as Sarah and Sameer to express himself and talk about the violence he witnessed in his homeland of Lebanon. As his Canadian psychiatrist pushes him for answers, he dodges her intimate questions repeatedly, reflecting an obvious internal struggle between expression and repression. In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy admits that the process of expressing traumatic events «is often difficult, painful and halted by the limits of language to articulate» (Vickroy, 2002: 197), yet she reiterates the need for trauma survivors to face the «event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion» (Vickroy, 2002: 197). In fact, the account of the unnamed protagonist of the novel mirrors a troubled psyche. His unconscious mind manifests itself through constant narrative shifts between the present and the past. Therefore, the innumerable flashbacks he has do not allow him to have a stable present. Ultimately, he reveals why he associates himself to a cockroach, as he blames himself for not protecting his mother from his abusive father or his murdered sister from her violent husband. Thus, he does not take the time to realize that he is a victim himself. The protagonist's Kafkaesque 'metamorphosis' into an unwanted insect asserts its omnipresence through every aspect of his life and reminds him of his guilt. For instance, the cockroach in his head revives many suppressed memories: «When you hid in your mother's closet I was also there, and when you stole candy from the store I was there, and when you collected bullets, and when you followed Abou-Roro down to the place of the massacre and watched him pull golden teeth from cadavers, I was there» (Hage, 2009: 202). The cockroach, which represents the protagonist's intrusive past in the present, symbolizes the nation's restlessness, as its undealt-with traumatic past keeps on emerging in the present.

In the final pages of *Cockroach*, the unnamed protagonist gives himself a second chance to redeem his past mistake and attempts to achieve liberation from his own trauma by killing the man who tortured his Iranian lover. And so, responding to violence with another violent act acquires a therapeutic dimension and allows him to regain his identity as a traumatized subject. Through his novel, Hage tries to provide a narrative of closure that would allow a much coveted reconciliation between his nation's past and present; as such, «[t]he memory of individual actors in the trauma is solicited in order to cure the entire society; the production of history is thus tied to a narrative of disclosure, closure and reconciliation, along with the particular model of the relation between past and present that the traumatic narrative implies» (Radstone - Schwarz, 2010: 9). Just as private memory of trauma becomes public through the narratives, so does individual healing become collective. Caruth's own conclusion that «literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex

relation between knowing and not knowing» (Caruth, 2010: *Introduction*) illustrates the interest of the post-Civil War Anglophone Lebanese novel in probing the thin line that separates knowing and not knowing about the traumatic experience; for, not knowing would necessarily entail the injurious repetition of the wound, another Civil War in Lebanon.

CONCLUSION

Though forty-years-old, the memory of the Civil War of 1975 silently overshadows every aspect of political life in Lebanon and the Middle East region. Unfortunately, it seems that current political decision-makers have abstained from learning anything from its lessons, as it can be best exemplified by the violence witnessed today in Syria and Iraq. As a consequence, enforced forgetfulness of violence proves to be a fatal mistake, as perpetrators and victims are denied the right to understand the significance of the war as a historical, political, and social event. In 2004, the former Lebanese Minister of Culture, Ghassan Salameh, wrote in the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Nahar*:

We should not forget the war, but we should also not become its prisoners, nor should we impose it on the new generation. Today's youth have a right to forget and we have a right to remember. I am concerned that they will make the same mistakes because we have not studied all of the war's consequences. Perhaps we abandoned this more quickly than what was needed. We should find a balance between the right of remembrance and the duty of forgetfulness. (Barak, 2007: 49)

Postwar fiction written by contemporary Anglophone Lebanese authors seeks to achieve the balance mentioned by Salameh. By pulling out the War of 1975 from the abyss of oblivion, they assert the Lebanese people's right to remember and mourn the lost souls who were the victim of incomprehensible violence and hatred, but they also usher in an era of hope where these people can «finally get completion for that part of [their] [lives]» (Alameddine, 2001: 115) and move on. In this manner, commemorating violence publicly becomes the means through which the Lebanese, as a people, may potentially cure collective war trauma.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alameddine, Rabih (1998), *Kooloids: The Art of War*, Great Britain, Abacus.
- Alameddine, Rabih (2001), *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company.
- Barak, Oren (2007), «'Don't Mention the War?' The Politics of Remembrance and Forgetfulness in Postwar Lebanon», *Middle East Journal*, vol. 61, pp. 49-70.
- Bracher, Mark (2004), «Healing Trauma, Preventing Violence: A Radical Agenda for Literary Studies», *JAC*, vol. 24, pp. 515-561.
- Caruth, Cathy (2010), *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press.
- Dean, Eric T. (1997), *Shook over Hell: Post-Traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War*, United States of America, Eric T. Dean, Jr.
- Eppert, Claudia (2005), «Remembering Obligation: Witnessing Testimonies of Historical Trauma», in Simon, Roger (ed.), *The Touch of the Past*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 50-64.
- Hage, Rawi (2008), *De Niro's Game: A Novel*, New York, Harper Perennial.
- Hage, Rawi (2009), *Cockroach*, Great Britain, Hamish Hamilton.
- Hamilton, Paula (2010), «A Long War: Public Memory and the Popular Media», in Radstone, Susannah - Schwarz, Bill (eds.), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, New York, Fordham University Press, pp. 299-311.
- Haugbolle, Sune (2002), *Looking the Beast in the Eye: Collective Memory of the Civil War in Lebanon*, Oxford, University of Oxford.
- Hodgkin, Katharine - Radstone, Susannah (eds.) (2003), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, New York, Routledge.

- Hout, Syrine (2008), «Tears of Trauma: Memories of Home, War, and Exile in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine*», *World Literature Today*, vol. 82, n. 5, pp. 58-62.
- Nasrallah, Dimitri (2004), *Blackbodying: A Novel*, Quebec, DC books.
- Radstone, Susannah - Schwarz, Bill (eds.) (2010), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, New York, Fordham University Press.
- Vickroy, Laurie (2002), *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, United States of America, the University of Virginia Press.
- Walker, Janet (2003), «The Traumatic Paradox: Autobiographical Documentary and the Psychology of Memory», in Hodgkin, Katharine - Radstone, Susannah (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, New York, Routledge, pp. 104-119.