

Memory, Trauma, and Postcolonial Identity: Sahar Mustafah's The Beauty of Your Face

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الذاكرة والصدمة والهوية ما بعد الاستعمارية: رواية جمال وجهك لسحر مصطفى

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Abstract

Sahar Mustafa's novel *The Beauty of Your Face* is a tale of suffering of a Palestinian family immigrated to America woven around collective and individual memory, trauma, and a sense of disintegration of the self. Memory and history are interchangeably used in the novel. The first-generation immigrants suffer from displacement and identity crisis and their memory of past life triggers mental agony as they have a traumatic past. The couple fails to integrate into their new community. However, the second generation, i.e., their three children, despite being born and brought up in America, suffer for lack of opportunities for integration as they are constantly reminded of their cultural differences and told again and again that they didn't belong there. The protagonist, Afaf, at one point in her life, when she feels totally lost, finds an opportunity to return to her primordial self through her religion and realizes that it is there that she feels a sense of belonging as her religious community is more than welcoming to her. I employ theoretical tenets from memory studies and postcolonial studies to argue that Sahar Mustafa, like several other fiction writers of memory and trauma, uses trauma and memory as a trope to represent the effects of colonialism on individual and collective lives, especially their loss of identity and disintegration of the self.

Keywords: memory; trauma; self; postcolonialism; collective unconscious; immigrants.

خلاصة:

رواية جمال وجهك لسحر مصطفى هي حكاية معاناة عائلة فلسطينية هاجرت إلى أمريكا، وتدور أحداثها حول الذاكرة الجماعية والفردية والصدمة والشعور بتفكك الذات. تُستخدم الذاكرة والتاريخ بالتبادل في الرواية. يعاني المهاجرون من الجيل الأول من النزوح وأزمة الهوية، وتثير ذكرياتهم عن الحياة الماضية عذابًا نفسيًا لأن لديهم ماضيًا مؤلمًا. يفشل الزوجان في الاندماج في مجتمعهما الجديد. ومع ذلك، يعاني الجيل الثاني، أي أطفالهما الثلاثة، على الرغم من ولادتهم وتربيتهم في أمريكا، من نقص فرص الاندماج حيث يتم تذكيرهم باستمرار باختلافاتهم الثقافية وإخبارهم مرارًا وتكرارًا أنهم لا ينتمون إلى هذا المكان. في مرحلة ما من حياتها، عندما تشعر البطلة عفاف بالضيق التام، تجد فرصة للعودة إلى ذاتها البدائية من خلال دينها وتذكر أن هناك تشعر بالانتماء حيث يرحب بها مجتمعها الديني أكثر من أي شيء آخر. أستخدم المبادئ النظرية من دراسات الذاكرة ودراسات ما بعد الاستعمار لأزعم أن سحر مصطفى، مثل العديد من كتاب الخيال الآخرين الذين يكتبون عن الذاكرة والصدمة، تستخدم الصدمة والذاكرة كأداة لتصوير آثار الاستعمار على حياة الأفراد والجماعات، وخاصة فقدان الهوية وتفكك الذات. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الذاكرة، الصدمة، الذات، ما بعد الاستعمار، اللاوعي الجماعي، المهاجرون.

Introduction

Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face* (2020) relates the lives of three generations of a Palestinian family settled in America. The first-generation immigrants left Palestine as displaced individuals after Israeli settlement snatched their ancestral lands and destroyed their family home. The couple had hardly any sound means of survival in Palestine, so, on an invitation from a cousin in the US, they moved to America. The second generation- their two daughters and a son- acquired American lifestyle, and as a result, failed to reconcile with their parents' way of life, which to them

was the cause of their failure in America. The eldest child in the family, their daughter Nada, is so frustrated with her parents that she elopes with her White boyfriend, never to return to her parents. The incident leaves her parents shattered, especially her mother who loved her daughter very much and failed to bring her life back on track again. The second child, the protagonist in the novel, Afaf Rahman, grows up absorbing the indifference of her mother towards her, hatred from her surroundings, and a sense of a fragmented self. The third child, a boy, Majeed, is more assimilated in the American life, but he also lives a disoriented life and never marries. Afaf, past her teenage years, finds solace in Islam and develops the sense of self-awareness. She also completes her education and is appointed as the principal of Nurrideen School for Girls, a Muslim school in the Chicago suburbs. However, one morning a shooter attacks the school and guns down fourteen girls and their music teacher. Incidentally, Afaf comes face to face with the shooter and tries to talk him out of his motive to kill innocent students. As she talks to him, she hears from him the dreaded phrase she has already come across on several occasions: *you people don't belong here*. The shooting event takes Afaf back to her past, to Palestine, the country she has never been to and knows only in the narratives related by her parents, her life in America cursed since her childhood as she always faced prejudice, her mother's total negligence towards her after the disappearance of her older sister and her dashed dreams to return to her homeland which shattered her family, and all those related past events that have shaped her present. The third generation- Afaf's daughter Azmia, and her two sons- is more assimilated in American life though still facing the threat of White supremacist terrorism. Azmia and Afaf are poles apart. Azmia is the present, an American girl, while Afaf, with a past in Palestine, a broken past, is trying to make a different present. She bears the memories of suppression, patriarchal dominance and male chauvinism. Azmia, on the other hand, is assertive, not to be cowed down by her brothers representing patriarchal force, and trying to surge ahead following her dreams. After the school shooting, Azmia became a symbol of anti-Islam bigotry in the country as she related the first-hand account of the shooting incident. Afaf was so unlike her at that age; she was so submissive, with no sense of self, an invisible child.

The selected novel presents a host of issues that need critical attention, such as gender, race, religion, and culture, all working against the immigrants in the novel in settling down and living a normal life in the host country. Gender is an issue since there are some widespread views in the Western countries about women in Islam and their Muslim identity. On several occasions Mustafah juxtaposes the Islamic perspectives on women with the Western perspectives and presents women's suppression as a universal patriarchal problem not confined to just one religious community. Race plays an important part in the novel as the protagonist belongs to a colonized, Oriental race and the West has certain fixed ideas about the Orientals. Race is also intertwined with religion, though religion in their case bears its own significance since the protagonist and her family belong to Islam and the novel depicts a widespread hatred towards Islam in the West. Their culture is predominantly in contrast to the culture of the host country. Colonialists and racial supremacists wish to subsume the cultural identity of the immigrants, not for assimilation but for hegemonic dominance to rule. Reassessment of history/memory from a postcolonial perspective debunking the colonial myths about cultures, colonized peoples, and races is essential at this juncture (see Rothberg, 2013).

The Beauty of Your Face lends itself to a postcolonial interpretation of the issues raised in its textual fabric. However, the present study employs the tenets of both postcolonial studies and memory studies as interpretive tools since memory, as outlined in the novel, intertwines with the characters' postcolonial condition. Even otherwise too, the overlaps between memory studies and postcolonial studies are ubiquitous, and therefore, an eclectic approach, rather than preferring a single frame of reference, is quite helpful in making sense of a complex text like the selected novel. The field of postcolonial studies is concerned with the cultural and political legacies of the past in the present, while the field of memory studies has emerged to make meaning of the memories and legacies shaped primarily by colonial/postcolonial experience. For example, Mechkarini et al. (2023), referring to the discourse around the return of looted objects from erstwhile colonies, observe that the looted objects are more than just precious objects. They evoke a history that has been complicated and conflicted, the history that reminds the colonized of the expropriation of their land, plunder of economic resources, and systemic oppression of the indigenous population. The confluence of memory studies and postcolonial studies provides productive sites of overlap between them as both grow in close proximity to each other. I have also used insights from trauma studies to dive deep into the fragmented consciousness of the major characters in the novel, not only of the immigrants but also of the White shooter who is portrayed as a victim of pain and trauma. Cathy Caruth (2014), a pioneer in the traditional model of trauma studies, views trauma as an event that leads to the fragmentation of consciousness preventing direct linguistic representation. For this very reason, trauma remains outside the purview of normal memory studies since it is totally unassimilated in human consciousness. Experience of trauma irrevocably damages the psyche, and as a result, needs a different source for its outlet. The shooter, for instance, agrees to a meeting with Afaf in his prison cell, but still remains defiant to her questions as to why he did what he did. But when he grasps that she can relate to his pain and trauma, he breaks down. His tears are more potent and meaningful than his words, if he had spoken any.

A word on employing the interpretive insights from both memory studies and postcolonial studies in the present study would be relevant here. Postcolonial textual interpretations are incomplete without drawing insights from memory studies since memory studies have been crucial in making sense of the postcolonial subjectivity. Götsche (2019), for

instance, notes that the postcolonial reappraisal of history has always relied upon the inseparably intertwined ideas of colonialism, decolonization and individual and collective memory, and yet the dialogue between memory studies and postcolonial interpretations has begun only recently, though the recognition of their confluence has been long overdue. The lively dialogue between the two related inquiries promotes comparative postcolonial studies and creates more integrated frames of reference for research. Similarly, Keightley (2022) firmly believes that as a discipline 'memory studies' needs to draw more effectively on postcolonial studies since memory mediated as narratives is inextricably linked to the legacies of colonialism and empire. Kennedy and Silverstein (2023) address the problems of transmission faced by scholars of deep history and memory studies. Studies of deep history in conjunction with cultural memory, the scholars argue, might offer ways of reconsidering the possibilities of a decolonizing future.

Sahar Mustafah's work falls in the category of fiction that explore the complex relationship between sociocultural influences, violence, and trauma- works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* (1994), Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000), Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* (1985), Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina* (1992), Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1995), and Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* (1986). Therefore, I have employed interpretive tools from trauma theory too to make meaning of the lives of characters suffering from violence and trauma. Traumatic incidents and their long-term influence on victims are used by contemporary novelists as fit subjects to reflect on the ethics of representing historical acts of violence, such as is perpetrated by Israel in Palestine (Sabol, 2007; Vickroy, 2002). The studies by Kurtz (2018), Sabol (2007) and Vickroy (2002) have been very helpful in framing my points for the present study. Vickroy's study on trauma narratives is especially influential in its use of trauma, postcolonial, and object relations theories, the aspects I have found in the experiences that shape the relationships, identity, and symbolization in *The Beauty of Your Face*.

Discussion

The novel opens with an angry call to Nurrideen School for Girls from the parent of a student complaining to the Principal, Afaf Rahman, against the inclusion of *The Great Gatsby* in their course of study for, according to the caller, the theme of the novel is Un-Islamic teaching "drinking and debauchery." The position refers to Mustafah's balancing act between radicalism and liberalism within Islam. Mustafah believes in liberalism, especially concerning girls as we notice after a few pages that she portrays young girls as champions of human rights who raise questions to the motives of radicalized Muslims, the kind of people who shot Malala Yousafzai in the head for wanting an education, questions like "How can they do that? Aren't they Muslims, too?" (*The Beauty*, p. 5) To this question, Afaf answers her daughter, "They're not true Muslims, habibtī" (*The Beauty*, p. 5). The opening para also sets the tone for the things to appear in the novel, that is, the power of Islamic thought to bring a sea change in the believers' lives. There was a time when Afaf called herself a fallen person since she was directionless, but when she embraced the spiritual aspects of her religion, her life took a positive turn. Similarly, her father was such a drunkard that he almost killed himself under the effect of alcohol, but after the accident he returned to his religion and worked for peace and harmony in his community in America.

Return, Decolonization

Return to religion is an attempt to access the collective memory, a past and a culture that sustained the life of their ancestors for centuries; it is a return of Palestine in their lives. To establish a religious place in the new community is to create a place to belong to. Afaf has never belonged to any place. Her family history and her own history till now has been as chequered as the history of their old country. The return to religion also brings them closer to their lost culture and lost home. It provided them with hope; the past provides hope for a better future. The point, and my argument, here is that the return of the subjects to the religion of their birth is closely related to their displacement and the colonialism behind it. Displacement triggers a devastating mental agony that can be tackled only by returning to the originary place. Displacement, thus, may be geographical, cultural, ideational, religious, spiritual, or mental. The mental effects of displacement vary from person to person, though none has the capability to escape the influence of displacement on their personal make up. The effects are carried through generations, especially the trauma caused by displacement. Sahar Mustafah uses trauma and memory as a trope to represent the effects of colonialism on individual lives, especially the loss of identity and disintegration of the self, although this representation comes at the cost of a bit dilution of both memory and trauma since imposition of the narrative form by its very nature restricts the true representation. I agree with Sabol (2007) that the dependence of narrative form on coherent linear memory to represent trauma distorts, dilutes, or otherwise misrepresents the trauma, yet it is to be admitted that the novels, such as Mustafa's *The Beauty of Your Face* concede that the compulsion to tell the traumatic story often proves overwhelming, despite the inherent limitations of narrative form. Incidents causing mental trauma, particularly among children and teenagers, need to be essentially narrativized. Afaf's friend, Kowkab, for instance, feels humiliated in her class as, on her teacher's asking, she told the meaning of her name to the class as "Planet," and one boy said, "Like Your anus!" That was a cultural as well as mental shock to the schoolgirl. The social worker at Afaf's school made comments in the case of Layla Hamad's abuse at home by her father, uses terms like certain ethnic groups (referring to Arabs) and code of silence (referring to the perceived honor killing among Arabs) and Afaf thinks the staff at her school must be

whispering at her back about her recently acquired hijab that it must have been thrust upon her by her father and brother, and they may be thinking of her as “poor Afaf, another oppressed Arabian woman! (*The Beauty*, p. 181). Afaf’s mother has moved back to Palestine, and she is happy there. She never left her apartment in Chicago to go on a walk, but in Palestine she strolls down the dusty roads to the utter surprise of the villagers. She is a living example of the fact that America is not a land of dreams, but one of nightmares, a place that snatches your child and ruins your marriage (*The Beauty*, p. 213) Afaf is body searched at the airport as she leaves for Hajj, verbally attacked by a woman in the washroom for wearing headscarf, and the woman flicks water at her scarf before leaving the washroom. The death of her father at Mount Arafat is symbolic. It’s a gesture of the collective memory, a long-lost past he wanted to return to. Nada returns to Afaf after her father’s death, and the old memories return, vehemently. In fact, it is displacement of the family from their ancestral home in Palestine that has played havoc on all of them, the mother who could never reconcile her life to the realities in America and neglected her children, led to their broken marriage, the father began drinking and cheating on his wife (though he was basically a good man as proved by his later life), the eldest child in the family, Nada, disappearing from home because she could never tolerate it anymore, Afaf living a cursed life and Majeed never feeling secure. However, the return journey in each case leads to decolonization, and happiness.

Memory and Postcolonial Experience

The other point closely linked to memory and displacement is experience as colonial subjects. Colonialism seeks to absorb and subsume the colonized as slaves without identity, while the postcolonial people rely on individual and collective memories to preserve the self, identity, freedom, and above all, equality (see also, Fanon, 1967). Palestinians have been colonial subjects on two fronts, as Arab Muslims, and as colonized by Israel. Their experience as colonial subjects of Israel is not highlighted in the selected novel except as memories of the first-generation immigrants passed to their next generation as stories of the home (Bilad). We shall return to this point soon since it is closely linked to their experience as Arab Muslims, the Oriental subjects of the British empire. Colonial subjects, as an entity, have been a curious object of study of creative writers and myth makers since the time of Renaissance in the West, a little before colonialism. Creative writers are primarily mythmakers as myths are perpetuated by storytellers, dramatists, poets and even historians and anthropologists. The masses consume myths made endearing through the power of the pen. Myths are created, contextualized, re-created, and re-contextualized as old myths are reclothed, and new myths are generated. Myths are self-aggrandizing stories endearing to people and they keep on circulating in one or the other form. Some myths are particularly revisited at particular historical moments in particular cultures.

A significant point to note at this juncture is that the people of the Orient were the subjects of Occidental myths, and to the common masses those stories possessed the power of truth and their cultural notions, prejudices and love-hate relationships with their cultural others were shaped by popular myths. At some point in time when the Age of Reason gave rise to the notions of biological determinism, scientific progress, social progress, and high mental aptitude, and peoples were categorized against the traits set for each category, the Oriental were viewed as scientifically backward, socially degenerate, uncivilized, and mentally retarded (Said, 1978: 207). This ideological mythology was part of the colonial scheme for the justification of their presence in the colonies since, as Edward Said observes, “almost all colonial schemes begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, ‘equal’ and fit” (Said, 1994: 80). To a large extent, the same ideological mythology achieves the Israeli objectives in Palestine occupation with the only difference that a new myth, ‘terrorist’ has been appended to the description of the colonial subject. Moving on a little further, myths shape our ideas of our own culture, primarily a hegemonic supremacist image of ourselves, and at the same time define our notions of other cultures not practically known to us. That is where lies the White shooter’s idea of the Arab Muslims in America as others, who do not belong to his nation. Interestingly, “Afaf has tried hard her whole life to be like amarkan, only to be rejected and used” (137). The simple reason is that she comes from a colonial subject race. The shooter knew practically nothing about Afaf or her community more than the images he consumed from popular media, particularly after 9/11.

Memory and Myth Making

The White man’s argument about belonging/unbelonging of Arab Muslims in America is founded on the Eurocentric colonial era myths on the cultures of the occupied lands being perpetuated in Americas too. On the other hand, the White population in America has successfully established their own myth as truth that they are the lawful residents of America. The indigenous people of America, whatever their dwindling number now may be, are pushed aside, while the Black and other non-whites are posed as the “others” who do not belong to “the White man’s country.” The problem the protagonist and her family in *The Beauty of Your Face* struggle with are, thus, rooted in their colonial experience, and in that sense the text lends itself to a postcolonial interpretation, despite the fact that it is an American narrative and America is not a “postcolonial” space since the space is not decolonized; it is a space that needs decolonization. The critical discomfort in this position is similar to the discomfort of indigenous scholars in Australia who are uncomfortable with postcolonial theory since they still live in a colony. Indigenous Australian writers, poets, and scholars, such as Bobbi Sykes, Tony Birch, Larissa Behrendt, and Ben Silverstein, to name only a few, all echo the same lament that they live in a colonial society, and therefore, “Post-colonialism in Australia is a job, a luxury enjoyed

only by the academy” (Birch, 1997: 16). Or like in Canadian contexts, there is nothing postcolonial except some academic interest in the topic in the academia. For instance, Razack (2002) observes that Canada has its own national stories, implicating a racial story, that establish the categories of belonging and unbelonging to the Canadian space. My discomfort echoes the sentiments of Ben Silverstein (2016) about Australia and of Razack about Canada as I say that there is nothing post about colonialism in America. The point is significant since the position of the Whites in America provides them ample powers to propagate their selective narratives and enforce their hegemony. The point is significant also from the perspective that the White mythology about the White race being a peaceful, tolerant, persevering race who have developed America into a great country it is now (“Make America great again”, a call often repeated by Donald Trump) functions to sustain and justify the power of the strong and helps build the arguments for settler colonialism in Israel and the ongoing genocide of Palestinians (see, for example, Carey and Silverstein, 2020). Afaf’s parents were the victims of displacement caused by colonial intervention in their country.

At a cursory glance, one feels that Sahar Mustafah is trying to strike a balance in *The Beauty of Your Face* between two extreme positions, radical Islamism and White racism. However, a closer scrutiny of the novel reveals that on the obverse Mustafah offers a trope for the resistance of those on the receiving side in America to White racism, while on the reverse side it is Palestinians’ resistance to Israeli occupation of Afaf’s homeland. The White shooter, as a representative of a sizeable racist population in America (the teachers at Afaf’s school, Coach Dean, and all others who look at her hijab in a strange manner) tries to dehumanize the non-Whites in America, in this case the Arab Muslims, through the use of history, representation, language, and the socio-political as well as narrative power he claims to wield, by creating distorted myths and knowledge claims, while in Palestine, Israel dehumanizes Palestinian resistance fighters as “terrorists” working against a state that is fighting in self-defense. Resistance to these distortions is crucial and Afaf’s resistance in the fictional narrative is praiseworthy. Reclaiming history, by returning to her religion, material symbols, gestures and other associated acts, Afaf is engaged in a decolonization project (Laylor, 2024).

Sahar Mustafa has employed a few more tropes to achieve the desired effect, such as attack on the Muslim school, the attacker as a white man, death of Mahmoud [Afaf’s father] while on Hajj, Afaf’s return to her religion soothing her spirit, Afaf’s mother’s aversion to religion and God, and suffering as a trigger to return to one’s original religion. It’s Afaf’s primordial instinct, the unconscious in Freudian terms, that allows her to feel solace in her religion. The other related aspects, such as her suffering, non-acceptance by her White surroundings, and her feeling of belonging to the country of her birthplace play only a minor role. Her headscarf represents now her ‘self,’ without which she feels a non-self; she cannot afford to lose her self. So, when the shooter orders her to remove the scarf from her head, she decides not to take it off even at the risk of her life; she rather attacks the shooter and flings herself at him, suffering four bullet wounds in the bargain- three in the abdomen, and one in her hand.

Memory and Material Symbols

Hijab is a potent symbol in the novel, a symbol of Afaf’s Islamic identity that has given her a sense of life, sense of belonging, and the sense of having any worth in the world. It is also a potent symbol to the dominant population, the Whites who also see it as a symbol of Islamic identity and therefore a threat to them. The discourse around gender, oppression, patriarchy, and so on are centered around the hijab. Although Afaf has chosen to wear Hijab on her own accord, she knows that most of the Whites who look at her hijab strangely must be thinking that since she is an Arab Muslim, hijab must have been thrust upon her by her male kins, like her brother, father or husband. They didn’t know that her brother and mother were completely against her wearing hijab. Though their reasons were different from the reasons the White men/women may ascribe to it. Her brother was against a display of any religious identity since he has all the time witnessed hatred towards himself since childhood for being an Arab Muslim; he had seen other Muslim Arab boys being made fun of, for their names, their language, their cultural practices, food habits and all. So, he has imbibed a kind of aversion to his Arab Muslim identity which has made him an outcaste in the community, although that aversion doesn’t pay him, doesn’t serve any purpose and he realized it later in life. Similarly, his mother was not against God or her religion, she was against a display of being a Muslims woman in America since she has suffered only humiliation at every step of her life for being a Muslim in the strange society. She could never feel integrated, and she was never allowed any integration by the society around her. She wants to tear off Afaf’s hijab from her head not because she is against hijab but because subconsciously, she is scared that Afaf may come to harm because of that piece of cloth. Even Nada, their eldest daughter hates her parents not because they couldn’t provide her the basic necessities of life but because they belonged to a community that was unacceptable in America, while her life was in America now, not in any Muslim dominated Arab country; Nada wants to be part of the winners not the losers. She falls in love with a White boy and elopes with him. And yet, she could not be completely part of the winning team; there were times in her life when she was also humiliated as an Arab wife of a White man.

Postcolonial Experience and Belonging

When the shooter tells Afaf, “What do you know about me? You don’t care a goddam bit about me or this country. You don’t belong here” (*The Beauty*, p. 277), she swallows the pain as she knows how many times she has heard that. “I was born in this country – just like you,” she says (*The Beauty*, p. 277). Mustafah contrasts Afaf’s feeling of

belonging to America with the shooter's casual relationship with the land. The shooter has a history of violence and racial hatred. He has already faced police warning because he threatened an Indian renter, in the same building where he lived, with a pistol. The Indian man had cautioned him not to visit his apartment without his permission, and only in his presence. The Indian man calls his apartment his "home" though he hadn't been long in America, while the shooter has already lived in the same building for twenty years and still it was not a "home" to him. This stands in stark contrast to his claim, and other racist Americans' claim, to Afaf again and again that she did not 'belong' there while she was born and brought up there and was not less American than any other Americans. The shooter thinks the same about the Indian man, 'why don't these people go back to their own country, they don't belong here.' He had visited his apartment where he found his wife breastfeeding a baby. The woman shouted at him, and he came back home crestfallen and scared. Later her husband came to his doorstep and gave him the warning. Mustafah shows that the local media and the lawyer of the shooter, as usual, draw the character of the shooter as a lone wolf, who was desperate with his life and indulged in shooting in frustration, not representing the larger community, although at every step in her life and everywhere- in shops, grocery stores, public convenience buildings, and so on, Afaf finds that the White men and women stare menacingly at her headscarf. She feels unsafe in their presence; she feels she was not free to practice her belief in her own country, the country which boasts of equality and justice for all. The White supremacists claimed America was their country and all others were mere strangers there, had no right to be there. It is important to see whose memories/history matter in such a discourse, and what the purpose of memory in such situations is.

The white taxpayers of Tempest, where Afaf's parents lived, had been witnessing with trepidation a growing Muslim population. The proposal of Ali Abu Nimir, an Arab businessman, to open a private Islamic school on the lands of an old covenant, for Muslim children, was rejected for the Whites didn't want to see an expansion of "un-Christian" space in their midst. People around the neighborhood tossed M-80s over the school fence on a regular basis. It was a message loud and clear: *You don't belong here*. Islamophobia may have deeper roots than visible in 9/11, going deep down the soil to Islamic jihad and Christian crusade days, the fear of each other entrenched in the memory of both Muslims and Christians; even deeper in fact, to the days of genesis of Islam. This shared memory and the shared ancestry makes people uncomfortable since there has been a time when they were arch enemies, whereas from the perspectives of today's globalized world that was an old folly, as Krutz (2018), commenting on suffering and tragedy in Torquato Tasso's epic *La Gerusalemme Liberata*, observes that Tasso's thriller about the efforts of Christians to liberate Jerusalem from Muslim control during the First Crusade feels uncomfortable, given the fact that current geopolitical conflicts also pit the Abrahamic faiths against each other. These differences run deep, probably since the time of genesis of Islam, and the Christians see Muslims praying a different God, as one white woman confronts Afaf insisting that their gods were different.

Colonial Structures and Trauma

Trauma studies scholars (such as Caruth, 1991, 2014; Bianchini et al., 2005; Hirsch, 2008; Pandey, 2001; Yusin, 2009) find that the effects of trauma may last several generations (Bezo and Maggi, 2018). A traumatic experience in the present triggers the past memory of trauma not only in the first generation who directly experienced the trauma but also in the second or third generation who inherit the experience. Hirsch (2008), who has studied the holocaust survivors and their future generations, for example, calls them "postmemory" generations. In the words of Hirsch, "Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (p. 103). The point is significant since traumatic memory, naturally ingrained in the brain, hinders man's natural personal development, and the individual may falter in establishing relationships, and growing up naturally. That may explain why some immigrants, especially from erstwhile colonized countries, are prone to quickly revisit their past if they encounter any event in the host country that triggers the same traumatic experience.

The Beauty of Your Face is an interplay between memory and postcolonial [traumatic] experience in which present traumatic experiences trigger past trauma in the first-generation immigrants, and also affect the second-generation immigrants. As an example, Afaf's older sister, Nada, disappears on the pretext that she was going to stay the night with her friend; Nada's disappearance leaves a traumatic void in their life, and Afaf's mother spends the rest of her life with her memory, ignoring the younger children. The incident is relatable as Afaf's parents were driven out of their home in Haifa, Palestine, by Jewish settlers in 1950. Black and white photographs of her father and their easy life in olive groves and herds of sheep tell the story of displacement. Her parents faced difficulties in America and could not confront their children growing up in the new world, with generation gap and cultural gaps. Giving up their traditional beliefs also becomes traumatic to them. Nada hates her parents, especially her mom, because she feels less in her class because of her. Boys tease her for her Arabic name. Children's alienation dooms the immigrant parents, especially if they stick to their old memory, their history. They feel a sense of betrayal. The images of Bilad, the old country (Palestine) is part of their memory, a past riddled with issues, like the colonial past of a country is riddled with issues, to be fixed with the help of progress defined by modernization, by the western ideology. There lies the tension. However, a traumatic memory is essential to heal the past wounds and for a healthy present.

Images and Racism

Racism nurtures the image of the other as backward and wild, and that is how violence against the communities perceived as the other and a threat is justified. Afaf, in general, was a peace-loving girl, but she fights with one of her White classmates who calls her slut. But Coach Dean Phillips from Hoover High School blames only Afaf. The social worker (white, male) relates Afaf's behaviour to her cultural background and displays the prejudices the westerners have towards people from the Middle East, like patriarchal control and oppression of women. They ignore that even her classmates, the young generation, make fun of her background (Palestine) for which she has every right to object, and which causes her anger. Certain associations are prevalent in the images brought up to insult the other, such as camel is associated with the people of the Middle East and used as a symbol of backwardness, illiteracy, desert (of ideas, the so-called "progress" that aligns with typical Western values founded on market and consumerism); harem is used as a symbol of women's exploitation and oppression at the hands of patriarchal forces and subjugation; camel jockey as a worthless creature, and so on. Even a responsible teacher like Coach Dean Phillips uses these images to insult the expatriate Arab boys and girls like Afaf. These images were created by European travelers centuries back when they were awed by the alien, exotic culture of the Middle East. Like the photographic postcards of Algerian women in Malek Alloula's *The Colonial Harem* (1986), these images do not represent the Middle East but Westerners' fantasy of the Middle East. Alloula argues that the photographs in the book do not accurately represent Algerian women, but rather a Frenchman's fantasy of Oriental Female and her inaccessibility behind the veil in the forbidden harem (see also, Fałęcka, 2023). Afaf, to white boys, was an exotic creature to be explored and exploited, not to be treated as an equal companion. It was a gaze of inequality towards Afaf as the object of scrutiny and control. In fact, for the grown-up people like Coach Dean, the insulting inferiorization of Arabs in their midst in so many ways is the colonial legacy inherited as ideological rational to justify their hatred of the non-white and displayed as sympathy to their perceived "backwardness." So, it is part of the hegemonizing impulse, blurred by misinformation, misconceptions, and stereotyping as a justification for colonialism, typically followed by Israel in colonizing Palestine. To Coach Dean, Afaf's behaviour with her classmate becomes an occasion to mold his hatred of the non-white into a site for reproducing colonial relationship of power wielded by a white man. Harem is a very potent symbol used by the teacher since it represents his own long-standing fascination with the exotic place he is excluded from. In the Western White world, the harem is a highly sexualized realm of deviancy, debauchery, cruelty and excess.

Conclusion

To sum up, Sahar Mustafah's *The Beauty of Your Face* is a direct as well as indirect representation of racist and communal hatred in American society. The hatred is primarily rooted in colonialism, particularly the colonial representation of the cultures of Oriental societies. The writer, following the footsteps of several other fiction writers of memory and trauma, for example, Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood, Tim O'Brien, and Michael Ondaatje, uses several tropes, such as memory, history, and trauma to represent the effects of colonialism on individual and collective lives, especially their loss of identity and disintegration of the self. Several other tropes, like hijab, shooting of innocent girls, contrastive presentation of two cultures, return to past, and so on, are also employed to present a critique of colonial myths and to suggest that American culture, predominantly overshadowed by White supremacists, needs decolonization on several fronts. Colonial imagery that put the colonial subjects, particularly the Middle Eastern Arab Islamic population, in a frame of backwardness and inferiority, such as hijab, camel, camel jockey, harem, and male dominance in Islamic societies are all around the living space of the protagonist, Afaf, such as in schools, shopping areas, and in popular media. Sahar Mustafa also deconstructs the idea of belonging/not belonging in a community as a modern cultural construct premised on the supposed incompatibility of certain notions, such as hijab and women's freedom, particular cultural upbringing and life choices, etc. The author suggests that reclaiming one's past is one of the alternatives to decolonize the thought process, and it leads to personal satisfaction, fulfilment and happiness. In a frame of reference where the subaltern lacks a voice (to borrow the phrase from Gayatri Spivak- Can the Subaltern Speak?), attempts at mimicry and creolization do not work, as Afaf has tried hard her whole life to be like Americans, only to be rejected and used. She was rather an exotic creature in the American society, an object of curiosity and investigation.

I would be helpful to know that the title *The Beauty of Your Face* is taken from an Arabic folk song, indicating the significance of one's own cultural symbols.

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