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A STUDY OF TRAUMA IN AHLAM MOSTEGHANEMI'S NOVEL *CHAOS OF THE SENSES* (1998)

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**Abstract**

Trauma is commonly perceived as a severely disruptive experience that intensely affects the one's emotional formulations and perception of the external world. Trauma is one of the most important themes of contemporary literature. The field of Trauma Studies emerged with bearings to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma. A later model of trauma pioneered by Cathy Caruth applies a post-structural approach to claim that trauma is essentially 'unrepresentable' in language and irretrievably fragments consciousness. This view was challenged later by a pluralistic model of trauma that suggests traumatic experience promotes value and knowledge through a variety of representative modes that endorse knowledge and change. Trauma Studies have thus developed to explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. Ahlam Mosteghanemi is a distinguished novelist and feminist activist. In her writings, she often aims to illustrate the anguish and suffering of her female characters as means to gain self knowledge and self-confidence.

In *Chaos of the Senses* (1998), Mosteghanemi depicts the influential effects of the Algerian War of Independence and the gendered experiences on women through the portrayal of her protagonist, Hayat. This research paper aims to examine the responses of Hayat to the traumatic experience and gendered memories of the Algerian war. It follows the pluralistic approach of the Trauma Literary Theory to scrutinize the construction of a narrative after traumatic gendered experiences as a way of helping the individual towards a position of recovery.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Trauma Studies, psychoanalytic theory, literary criticism, war, gender, memory, narrative

**Introduction**

Ahlam Mosteghanemi (born 1953) is an Algerian novelist who has been acknowledged as the first woman writer to publish a novel in Arabic. For 35 years, Ahlam's literary contribution has well enriched the Arabic literary scene, as well

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as the canon of world literature, with her highly acclaimed sentimental and poetic work. In her writings Ahlam has fought against corruption, injustice, totalitarian regimes, fundamentalism, new forms of colonization and the denigration of women's right. The publication of her novels, *Zakirat el Jassad (Memory of the Flesh)* (1993), *Fawda el Hawas (Chaos of the Senses)* (1997), *Aber Sareer (Bed Hopper)* (2003), and *El Aswad Yalikou Biki (Black Suits You so Well)* (2012), has been considered by critics as a turning point in Arabic literature. In 1998, she has received the esteemed Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature for her first novel, *Memory in the Flesh*, and numerous accolades and awards for her work since then. Ahlam Mosteghanemi's work has been translated into English by different publishers, which further marks her popularity among the readers worldwide. In 2015, Bloomsbury published her well-celebrated novel *Chaos of the Senses* in English, the focus of this research paper.

*Chaos of the Senses* is a powerful tale of love, identity and liberation where, "Love always sits in a seat other than the one we were expecting it to, right alongside the place where we expected love to be." (Mosteghanemi 1) It is a novel of 'swirling' and 'towering' emotion." Hayat, the protagonist, is thrown into confusion when her "fictional world collides with reality, swept further into chaos by her lover and

then wrenched back into the horrific Algerian civil war" (Baaqeel 1). Hayat is a young novelist trapped in a loveless marriage with a high-ranking officer. As her husband gets preoccupied with politics, Hayat finds independence from her strictly controlled life in the realm of her writing. She writes an endearing story for her characters. But "the line between fiction and reality blurs when she gets seduced with a man" who seems to have walked out of her written story. (2) The passionate love story in her story turns into an illicit love affair hidden in the dark corners of her city busted with the flames of war. It is through the depiction of the historical legacy of the violent Algerian War and its aftermath as well as the traumatic memories and the gendered experiences lived by Hayat, that Ahlam Mosteghanemi tells her story of survival.

The concept of trauma is commonly perceived as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the one's emotional formulations and understanding of the external world. It is one of the most interesting themes in literature. Trauma studies have developed therefore to investigate the effect of trauma in literature and society. They analyze the complex psychological and social factors that influence the self's conception of a traumatic experience and how such an experience shapes and is shaped by language.

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Trauma studies first developed with bearings to Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma that investigates an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether. (Freud 45) The traditional Freudian model of trauma proposes that trauma is an "unrepresentable event that fundamentally fragments the psyche." (45) It establishes the fact that traumatic experiences are repeated compulsively, divide the psyche, influence memory differently than other experiences, and are unable to be experienced initially but only in a narrative reproduction of the past. (Hartman 538-39) This criticism employs psychoanalytic theories to analyze emotional suffering in texts as well as the language of loss, disruption, and fragmentation.

In the 1990s, a number of studies arose to further examine the concept of trauma and its role in literature and society. This trauma model figures most prominently in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996) which takes a particular interpretation of Freud's trauma theories to forward a larger post-structural concern with the referential limits of language and history. The emphasis in Caruth's model on the intrinsic relationship between the individual and cultural group as well as the dissociative and silencing effects of trauma

continues in criticism that maintains the conceptual base of the traditional model but widens the theoretical framework to include feminist, race, and postcolonial theory. (Caruth 34-36)

More recently Trauma Literary Studies have endorsed a theoretical pluralism that pushes directly against the traditional Caruthian model. The pluralistic model of trauma seeks to understand not only the structural dimensions of trauma, but also the cultural dimensions of trauma and the diversity of narrative expression. (Mandel 120) In this model, trauma is analyzed as an event that modifies perception and identity and so a new understanding is formed about the self and external world. This approach often relies more heavily on the external stressor to show that trauma occurs in specific bodies, time periods, cultures, and places, each informing the meaning and representation of traumatic experience. Major contributions to this model of trauma include work by Ann Cvetkovich, Greg Forter, Amy Hungerford, and Naomi Mandel.

The shift in Trauma Literary criticism comes along with a well-deserved interest in the relationship between the individual and collective experiences of violence and suffering most prevalent in a cultural studies oriented approach. Examining the cultural context of an

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individual or collective group's experience of trauma enables greater attention to representations of extreme experience such as war, oppression, and racism. Particularly, war contexts, for there are consequences for the individual of living with memories of bloodshed and repression.

The processes of memory, moreover, remain central to the depiction of trauma's impact in the pluralistic model of trauma. Psychiatrist Laurence Kirmayer argues that the recollection of traumatic events is "governed by social contexts and cultural models for memories, narratives, and life stories. Such cultural models influence what is viewed as salient, how it is interpreted and encoded at the time of registration, and, most important for long-term memories that serve autobiographical functions, what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged" (Kirmayer 191). The pluralistic model of trauma argues further that traumatic memory carries determinate significance of the past event due to reflecting the values of the speaker who accords meaning in the act of recollection. The traumatic experience disrupts, yet does not foreclose memory's function or deny epistemological possibilities of the experience. (192)

In addition, the pluralistic approach to trauma has been adopted by many feminist theories on trauma. These posit

that trauma affects women differently from men. Because women and men start from different positions, they additionally deal with the aftermath of violence and trauma in different and gendered ways. (La Capra 81-83) Men are most often implicated in violence as both perpetrator and victim, while women are most often cast in the role of victim, whether or not they would choose this role (Modlinger 22). It is important to highlight that in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Chaos of the Senses*, the pluralistic model of trauma is exemplified with an added twist of gender in the characterization of the protagonist, Hayat.

This research paper uses the Trauma Literary Theory as its framework. It aims to examine the responses of Hayat in *Chaos of the Senses* to the traumatic experience and gendered memories of the Algerian war. It follows the pluralistic approach of the Trauma studies to scrutinize the construction of a narrative after traumatic gendered experiences as a way of helping the individual towards a position of recovery and healing.

**Discussion**

The effect of negative traumatic experiences on memory is an integral part of the examination of Hayat's responses in *Chaos of the Senses*. Typically, traumatic experiences are interrelated with strong negative emotions, causing these memories to be painful once recalled. It is however the management of these emotions that

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makes all the difference in life. In *Chaos of the Senses*, Hayat demonstrates an awareness of the negative gendered memory of the past that is prevailing. She is a woman who has remained in Algeria after the war and has started a successful career as a writer. Hayat seeks a substitute of the past negative memories in the fictional reality of her writings.

In her writing, Hayat entertains diverse heart-felt emotions that are hidden in her memory having suffered from the confinements of her life as a young girl growing up in a male dominant culture; undertaken the consequences of gendered comparisons with her brother; accommodated the expectations of her mother and grandmother as a young girl; lost her dad at a young age to war; agonized in a loveless marriage with an indifferent husband; and delved into the darkness of a forbidden love affair, Hayat thus strives with enormous traumatic and gendered experiences and memories.

When she reflects on her first short story about a woman's break-up with a mysterious lover, she says, "I loved this story, without realizing exactly what I had written ... I don't know how this story was born." (Mosteghanemi 10) Many of her negative emotions are also revealed through the memory of her childhood. When she remembers her brother, Hayat establishes purposeful comparisons between their

experiences during the war in Algeria to reflect on her situation as a woman; "Women, too, are like nations. If they want life, then destiny must respond, even if a high officer rules its fate, or a small dictator disguised as a husband." (Mosteghanemi 148) This comparison can be understood as a reflection on her negative emotions as well as a feminist response to the many restrictions placed upon women in Algeria. Hayat dismisses the painful memory and emphasizes her triumph over such restrictions with determination and persistence through her writing: "At the first rays of dawn I discovered that "No" was a seven-headed snake. Every time I killed one, another "No" appeared before my face, for different reasons every time. Nevertheless, I beat them all and slept, biting the apple of lust before the snake's very eyes." (Mosteghanemi 149)

Likewise Hayat reflects on the memory of her gendered experiences of childhood with such: "I remember how happy I was ... They awoke something in me, or a certain time that was so far away that it seemed as if it didn't really exist." (Mosteghanemi 133) Hayat reflects on what to do with these memories, thinking first of "leaving them in the dustbin of memory" or taking just one and not the other, because "In the eye of memory I could no longer distinguish between them." (133) The memories have a power that resonates with her in ways that she cannot fully

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comprehend, since she refers to “something within me” without specifying what it is. The past is recalled and in the process, brought back into existence, through this unidentifiable something within her.

The importance of memory and its incorporation with Hayat's present life is underlined further in her relationship with her mother. In the gender rituals of the Turkish baths, for example, Hayat reflects: "I actually understood her logic. The bath was the only place where she could meet all the women of the city. She could gossip and tell them what was happening to her." (Mosteghanemi 135) For Hayat, going to the Turkish baths with her elderly mother evokes the past because when Hayat sees her mother's personal objects in the steamy surroundings she notes that “just like in the old days she would show off her fine toiletries ... Nothing had really changed in twenty years.” (Mosteghanemi 135) The environment that is supportive for her mother is painful for Hayat, since she recalls the discomfort of a young girl who has not yet developed in to a woman: "There one learned from others' looks how to renounce one's own body, suppress one's desires, and deny one's femininity. They taught girls that not only was sex something to be ashamed of, but femininity as well and everything that revealed it, even in silence.” (Mosteghanemi 136) With the benefit of greater knowledge of the world, Hayat, however, projects her writer's

identity onto her experiences with her mother in the Turkish baths: “Perhaps I was secretly amusing myself by writing comments in my head, there in the middle of steam, water, lust, and female hypocrisy. I stood at a fair distance from both chastity and sin, where every writer and every normal person is supposed to stand.” (Mosteghanemi 138)

Hayat is thus never conquered by such negative gendered memories of the past because she lives in the present. Hayat uses her literary creative skills to turn the dealings of such practices to distance her from them. She acknowledges the oppressive power of her society, yet she resists them. Hayat will allow in her life the oppression that her mother and grandmother suffered. She will make her own choices and pursue her own identity. Hayat aligns herself with "every writer and every normal person." (Mosteghanemi 138) It is commonly argued after all that women are far more expected to turn to writing as a means of overcoming traumatic experiences and memories. In *Chaos of the Senses*, Hayat chooses writing as a medium through which she finds the ability to express her own gendered memories.

An interesting cultural dimension of the pluralistic model of trauma and the diversity of narrative expression can be seen in the way society relates to her body and image of her physical being. Hayat is

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able to imagine a different kind of existence that is not solely dependent upon the physical, reflecting that she might have half-realized as a child that “from the beginning I was just born to be a figure of ink and paper, diluted by all that water and steam.” (Mosteghanemi 136) This shows that Hayat identifies physically with her writing, taking on the properties of a writer to replace the all too feminine flesh that grows. Although Hayat still looks forward for beauty, it is not the socially structured beauty, rather one that will survive in the suffocating heat and damp of the Turkish baths, and by implication has the potential to endure in the outside world.

Hayat is aware of her traumatic experience as a female/child with all the negative and potent memories, recognizing them as a trauma. However, she has managed to transform them into something else that she can use in her adult life, writing skills. It is this that marks the pluralistic approach to trauma and memory. She does not deny memory, but uses it, with the help of her writing skills makes fictional worlds out of personal, lived – traumatic- experiences. Thinking of the death of her lover, who started out as a character in her story, Hayat emphasizes eminently well the power that she has as a professional writer: "I had always admired those writers whose greatness was found in their ability to say the most serious and painful things with a stunning lightness. I

have always wanted to be like them." (Mosteghanemi 213)

After a series of murders and threats in her busted city, Hayat recalls the poet Henri Michou and cites some of his poetry about the death of al-Taher Jaout, stressing that he was buried with pens instead of flowers: “You will not find him there, with the other graves. He has no gravestone, merely a few pens. Every evening, his hand wakes to continue writing.” (Mosteghanemi 216) Hayat channels her sad on these verses facilitates so as to move into a fictional dimension: “I believe that my voice died with the last verse. When I closed my notebook over the poem, it seemed to me that I had become part of a movie.” (Mosteghanemi 216) Leaving her notebook on the grave is also a symbolic act that makes Hayat feel like a well-established writer: "It resembled her to the extent that it made me think I was avenging the past for her. She enjoyed making up heroes on paper and killing them in books, the same way life loved and killed for no reason.” (Mosteghanemi 217)

Hayat's reaction the traumatic experience of and loss is thus ambivalent: “Despite my sadness, I left the cemetery almost happy. If all joy holds within it a certain amount of sadness, it is no wonder that sadness, too, carries with it some joy. We are ashamed to call it such, but artists know it well.” (Mosteghanemi 222) Hayat experiences events from two contrasting angles; happy and sad because she

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understands that history is cyclical rather than linear. Mentioning the past in this way reveals Hayat's triumph over the bitter memories and how they promote her to focus on the present to survive the difficult times in Algeria.

This pluralistic approach to trauma is yet better manifested in the parallels between the opening and closing chapters of *Chaos of the Senses*. At the start of the novel, Hayat is enthralled with a notebook in a book shop; "I stopped before this particular notebook, driven by an overwhelming instinct, taken in by that object, distinguished to me from everything else in the shop only by my certainty – or illusion – that it would bring me back to writing." (Mosteghanemi 11) At the end of the novel, Hayat recalls "the cycle of seasons" in connection with the school year start, and this idea is compared to the position of the writer: "It had been a sky renewing itself between two seasons and a writer renewing her in between two books." (Mosteghanemi 224) Memories of the writer visiting a bookshop at the change of the season one year before are repeated, and the shop owner asks the writer what she wants.

In the last line *Chaos of the Senses*, Hayat clearly states: "I was on the point of requesting some envelopes and stamps..." (Mosteghanemi 224) Obviously something is about to happen that evokes the past. It

seems likely that the writer will write a new book, and/or will indulge into a new life experience that will later be recorded into literature, thus becoming a part of real life, to be turned into literature, and so on. The blurring between what is fictional and what is real is a fruitful source of inspiration for the writer. Hayat engages with her memories in a pluralistic way and so manages to live her life away the limitations of traditional gender roles and society.

**Conclusion**

After examining the responses of Hayat to the traumatic experience and gendered memories of the Algerian war in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novel *Chaos of the Senses* (1998) by employing the pluralistic approach of the Trauma Literary Theory, the researcher reaches the conclusion that it is through Hayat's construction of a narrative that she is able to heal and recover after her traumatic gendered experiences.

The theoretical foundations and developments in Trauma Studies are based on Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma which has influenced the concept of trauma in literary criticism. Trauma is often the result of an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds one's ability to cope, or integrate the emotions involved with that experience. Trauma Studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical,

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and cultural significance. The Freudian-Caruthian model of trauma further applies a post-structural approach to claim that trauma is inherently 'unrepresentable' in language and irrevocably fragments consciousness. This view was challenged by the pluralistic model of trauma which emphasizes that traumatic experience locates value and knowledge through a variety of representational modes.

In Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novel *Chaos of the Senses*, Hayat struggles with a number of traumatic experiences and memories relating to her childhood, adulthood and marriage. Suffering from the confinements of her life as a young girl growing up in a male dominant culture; bearing the consequences of gendered comparisons with her brother; accommodating the expectations of her mother and grandmother as a young girl; losing her dad at a young age to war; agonizing in a loveless marriage with an indifferent husband; delving into the darkness of a forbidden love affair, Hayat strives with enormous traumatic and gendered experiences and memories. As a talented woman writer, however, Hayat succeeds to manage these traumatic experiences and gendered memories to rebel and refuse to follow the same course in life. She takes refuge in her creative writing skills and comes out triumphant with a promise of healing, recovery and accomplishments.

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