



## Memory and Trauma in Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun*

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### Abstract

This paper examines how Elias Khoury turns the Nakba and its aftermath story into a polyphonic testimonial narrative where memory serves as both an archive and a wound. The novel, *Gate of the Sun* acknowledges the fragmented, delayed, and frequently inexpressible nature of traumatic experience while resisting the erasure of Palestinian identity by fusing together bits and pieces of memory, silences, and oral histories. According to the research, *Gate of the Sun* transforms personal memories into a collective storehouse of meaning by positioning storytelling as an act of cultural resistance and recovery. Khoury's work demonstrates that memory is a generative force that may reshape identity and create new conceptions of justice in the future, rather than being static or exclusively retrospective. By doing this, the novel adds to the recording of the Palestinian experience as well as to the field of global trauma studies, illustrating the ways in which literature may act as a site of cultural renewal, co-witness, and testifying.

**Keywords:** Trauma, postmemory, storytelling, memory, narrative.

### Introduction

Many people consider Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (Babal-Shams, 2006) to be among the most important novels about communal trauma and Palestinian displacement. The novel weaves together bits and pieces of memories, testimonials and silences to create a huge repository of memory set against the backdrop of the 1948 Nakba and the Palestinian exile that followed. The dislocations and ruptures of Palestinian identity following forced exile are reflected in Khoury's narrative style, which is polyphonic, non-linear and interlaced with oral experiences. Memory serves as both a wound and an archive in the book, recording suffering, exile and displacement while also maintaining the cultural continuity of a people fighting against the erasure of the past.

This paper highlights that Khoury presents *Gate of the Sun* as a testimony story in which storytelling serves as both a means of survival and a storehouse of shared memory. The novel places trauma within the collective cultural wound of the Palestinian diaspora as well as at the psychological level of the individual. This study employs Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's concept of testifying as co-witnessing, Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, and Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as belated experience as its primary theoretical lenses of investigation. These frameworks collectively shed light on Khoury's literary techniques for reassembling disjointed memories into a living archive that defies historical erasure.

Trauma is "the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge," according to Cathy Caruth's well-known definition (Unclaimed Experience 4). According to Caruth, trauma is not just the actual experience of violence but also the manner that its unassimilated nature haunts survivors' years after it has happened. Palestinian displacement in *Gate of the Sun* operates in this way like the memory of the Nakba echoes across generations, resurfacing in stories, nightmares, and silences, rather than being limited to the time of expulsion in 1948. Trauma theory is extended to intergenerational transmission by Marianne Hirsch's idea of "postmemory." Children and grandchildren of survivors who inherit terrible narratives so thoroughly that they feel as though they are their own are described in Postmemory (The Generation of Postmemory 5). This phenomenon is exemplified in Khoury's novel through intergenerational storytelling, in which young Palestinians inherit their grandparent's memories as well as the unresolved scars that have been ingrained in them. Lastly, the performative and relational features of testimony are highlighted in Felman and Laub's work. Testimony involves a listener who engages in the process of creating meaning; it is not just a recitation of facts (Testimony 57). Khalil, the narrator of *Gate of the Sun*, becomes both a participant and a steward of Palestinian memory after hearing the dying resistance warrior Yunis

speak. The collective aspect of trauma is highlighted by this structure i.e. shared witnessing and telling are both necessary for survival.

*Gate of the Sun* is written by Khoury as a conversation between Yunis, the bedridden fighter, and Khalil, the storyteller. Khalil's recounting of Yunis's recollections of love, conflict, and exile blurs the lines between narrator and witness. The structure of the work is similar to that of an extensive oral archive, with tidbits of narrative weaved into a more comprehensive whole. Khoury's work, according to Amos Goldberg, combines memory, testimony, and myth to produce a "Palestinian archive of trauma" (Goldberg 340). The novel recognizes the necessity and impossibility of representation through its testimony framework. Khalil's story illustrates what Felman and Laub refer to as the dilemma of testimony like pain is difficult to fully express, but keeping quiet is just as risky because it could be erased. In order to support Caruth's assertion that trauma resurfaces in fragmented, delayed forms, Khalil narrates stories over and over again in various ways. There cannot be a single, authoritative history of the Nakba, as the narrative's repetitions and discrepancies highlight the survivors' disjointed memories.

Pain and memory are inextricably linked in *Gate of the Sun*. According to Yunis, his people's exile was like an unhealing wound, families were dispersed, towns were destroyed, and olive trees were removed. Khoury, however, also presents memory as an archive, preserving events that are meant to be lost in official histories. This archive function is carried out by Khalil's storytelling, which makes sure that the past is preserved even if it cannot be logically arranged. Oral storytelling recurrent theme serves as an example of Hirsch's postmemory theory. Although Khalil was not present for the 1948 relocation, he is nevertheless the inheritor of that trauma because to Yunis's memories. The stories he documents are new creations influenced by the act of transmission rather than rehashing the past. This demonstrates Hirsch's finding that postmemory is highly emotive, mediated, and imaginative. In the novel, memory is also demonstrated to be embodied. The experiences of survivors are inscribed on their bodies, repetitive motions, immobility, or stillness are signs of traumas that are difficult to describe. Many characters find it difficult to describe their experiences, yet their broken words, silences, and rituals end up becoming a language of trauma, illustrating Elaine Scarry's observation that suffering "actively destroys language" (The Body in suffering 4).

The conflict between the necessity of testifying quickly and the impossibility of complete expression is a major theme in *Gate of the Sun*. Khalil fears that he is creating or altering memories, yet Yunis frequently objects to his attempts to elicit logical narrative. This dynamic reflects Felman's assertion that testimony is always incomplete and what Caruth refers to as trauma's resistance to integration. However, the narrative also emphasizes the morality of listening. Khalil's testimony serves as a reminder of the value of sympathetic, focused listening during the testifying process. Thus, the novel dramatizes Felman and Laub's contention that co-witnessing is necessary for testimony i.e. Khalil's role as a listener and narrator is just as important as Yunis's account. In this way, *Gate of the Sun* maintains that trauma and memory are communal obligations rather than personal belongings.

Khoury places the suffering experienced by Palestinians in a larger historical and cultural context. Through the integration of personal recollections with myths, biblical allusions, and intertextual references such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*,

the book affirms Palestinian suffering as a component of a worldwide story of survival and displacement. Cultural memory serves as a framework for meaning-making, influencing both identity and collective futures, according to Aleida Assmann (Cultural Memory 37). This is demonstrated in *Gate of the Sun*, which turns the tales of exile into cultural relics that protect Palestinian identity from the erasures caused by occupation and conflict. Storytelling turns into an act of resistance in this sense. Khoury demonstrates the political importance of cultural memory by recounting what official histories refuse to acknowledge. According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, cultural trauma forces communities to re-evaluate their identities in light of their experiences, so reshaping collective identity (Cultural Trauma 1). This process is illustrated in Khoury's novel, Palestinian identity is reshaped by both loss and the continuous work of remembering.

## Conclusion

*Gate of the Sun* by Elias Khoury is a cultural archive of Palestinian trauma as well as a literary masterpiece. Khoury emphasizes the importance of storytelling for survival while dramatizing the impossibility of properly describing trauma by fusing together bits and pieces of witness, memory, and silence. The novel displays the fragmentation and belatedness of trauma through Caruth's perspective; it illustrates the ethical aspect of testimony as a collective act of bearing witness through Felman and Laub; and it illustrates the transmission of memory across generations through Hirsch's theory. Khoury ultimately turns literature into a space of both pain and recovery: a place where cultural memory defies erasure, where voices that have been silenced resurface, and where the trauma of relocation is reframed as a group effort to survive. In *Gate of the Sun*, testimony serves as a tool for building a future based on remembrance, fortitude, and dignity in addition to serving as a recitation of the past.

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