

Abstract

Trembling Tenors of Life: A Psycho-social Approach to Trauma in Select Arab and Iranian Women Writings in English

Scheherazade, the legendary storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights*, used her voice and stories to resist death, a metaphor for how Arab and Iranian women writers today use literature to fight silencing and marginalisation. Just as Scheherazade's tales ensured her survival, these contemporary writers employ storytelling to navigate the complex realities of trauma, identity, and resistance in their lives. Arab and Iranian women writers, such as Azar Nafisi, Basma Abdel Aziz, and Jokha Alharthi, face immense challenges in gaining visibility within a literary world, long dominated by Western narratives and perspectives. Despite this, their works have emerged as powerful contributions to global literature, providing critical insights into the intersections of gender, trauma, and socio-political resistance.

The present thesis analyses Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*, and Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*, focusing on how the characters are traumatised by both personal and political contexts, shaping the identity and resilience of female protagonists in contemporary Arab and Iranian literature based on the broader historical and socio-political forces at play, such as the Iranian Revolution and the Arab Spring.

The research applies trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and several other theorists to investigate how women's experiences of trauma are portrayed and processed in these narratives. The thesis explores whether the responses to trauma in these texts are gender-specific, focusing on how women navigate societal expectations related to class, politics, and gender roles. It also analyses how literature, fine arts and crafts can help in alleviating the mental agony the women have due to

trauma experienced in their lives. These creative outlets become essential for the characters' survival, offering not only relief from mental anguish but also a method for reclaiming agency in a society that seeks to control their narratives. Through the lens of postcolonial theory of trauma studies in literature, it also examines how these female writers resist and rewrite the Western-dominated literary landscape, creating space for indigenous voices that challenge colonial and patriarchal narratives.

Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* presents a poignant reflection on how trauma, particularly the trauma of living under an oppressive regime, impacts the intellectual and emotional lives of Iranian women. The personal trauma of these women is mirrored by the collective trauma of a society undergoing profound political repression. Similarly, Aziz's *The Queue* examines the psychological toll of living under an authoritarian military regime in post-Arab Spring Egypt. It speaks of the role of silence and invisibility imposed on citizens in authoritarian contexts; challenging the assumption that trauma is always voiced. Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* offers a deep exploration of both domestic and transgenerational trauma passed down through families and former slaves in Oman. The novel intricately weaves together the lives of people especially women across generations, examining how colonial legacies, slavery, and socio-political transformation affect their identity and resilience.

Ultimately, the thesis reveals how contemporary Arab and Iranian women writers not only reflect the trauma of their societies but also craft alternative spaces for healing and empowerment. The study contributes to a broader understanding of how literature and arts serve as vital tools for resisting trauma, reclaiming identity, and creating change in both personal and political contexts.