© Volume 2, Issue 8, ***August*** 2026 | JATIR
ISSN: 3139-8464 (p)

Khawf The Protector and the Tormentor in Zoulfa Katouh's as Long as the Lemon Trees Grow

[1]Jalwa Jaleel, [2]Dr. Roshma P.R
[1]Nilgiri College of Arts and Science, Thaloor, The Nilgiris
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nilgiri College of Arts and Science, Thaloor, The Nilgiris

***Abstract*—This paper examines Zoulfa Katouh's young adult novel, As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow, through the theoretical lens of Trauma literature, analysing how the novel represents the psychological and physical well-being of the Syrian Revolution survivors. The novel centers on Salama kassab a young pharmacy student in Homs experiencing severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and grief. The study explores how intense trauma disrupts traditional narrative structures, expressing internal suffering through sensory experiences, psychological detachment, and visual hallucinations. Drawing upon trauma theories formulated by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, this paper emphasizes the role of khawf, Salama's physical fear and trauma, which, beyond being a clinical symptom, serves as a crucial narrative device and coping mechanism. Khawf externalizes guilt, protects Salama from an overwhelming reality, and sustains her survival.**

***Index Terms*—Trauma literature, Khawf, Zoulfa Katouh, Survival, As Long as the Lemon Tree Grow, Syrian revolution**

I. INTRODUCTION

The horrifying realities of displacement, grief, and physical destruction are often portrayed in literature that has emerged from the Syrian conflict. Zoulfa Katouh shifts the emphasis inward in As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow, exploring the unseen psychological challenges brought on by conflict. Khawf, a striking representation of Salama's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), is essential to her path. Despite Khawf's initial appearance as a tormentor who instils survivor's guilt, a closer examination reveals a deeply complex psychological contradiction: he is both a cause of pain and an essential self-preservation mechanism. This essay examines Khawf's dual function as an oppressor and protector using trauma theory.

The psychological devastation of war often cannot be expressed in traditional narrative forms, calling for new forms of literary representation of the unrepresentable. In As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow, Zoulfa Katouh addresses this challenge by giving tangible form to the invisible scars of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Through the personification of fear in the character of Khawf, Katouh links clinical reality to literary symbolism. Trauma in the story is not an atmospheric abstraction, but rather a dynamic that shapes the protagonist's quotidian choices, emotional boundaries, and survival strategies.

Ultimately, this paper illustrates how Katouh employs Khawf to externalize the internal cracks created by war trauma, indicating that in the face of overwhelming terror, the mind constructs its own radical ways of survival.

II. NARRATIVE CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL REALITIES

The initial uprising of the Syrian Revolution occurred in March 2011 as a consequence of the Arab Spring, which reached Syria after similar explosions of protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. Initially, Syria appeared to stand on the sidelines, leading many observers to believe the regional upheaval would bypass the country. However, after Friday prayers on March 18, 2011, anti-regime protests broke out in several cities, most notably in Daraa, Hama, and Banyas. What started as a peaceful call for reform quickly escalated into a catastrophic civil conflict that reshaped the nation's socio-political landscape.

The setting of Homs plays a crucial role in reflecting Salama's psychological state. As one of the primary epicenters of the Syrian Revolution, Homs was heavily shelled and besieged, turning a thriving cultural center into a site of physical destruction. The hospital becomes a microcosm of the wider savagery of the war for an eighteen-year-old pharmacy student forced into the position of a surgeon. Salama experiences high stress daily due to the large number of wounded, the scarcity of medical supplies, and the ongoing threat of bombardment. This continuous physical siege is a clear reflection of Salama's psychological state; just as the city of Homs is under military siege, Khawf's phantom intrusion, anguish, and guilt are blocking Salama's consciousness.

Literary responses to such conflicts frequently struggle to find the right language for deep human suffering. In contemporary Middle Eastern novels, war is not merely a static background; it actively alters how characters think and disrupts conventional narratives.

As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow, written by Zoulfa Katouh in 2022, delves straight into this conflict. As a Syrian author who was raised in the diaspora, Katouh created the book to present a genuine, human perspective on the revolution that goes beyond the headlines and to give voice to the unstated trauma of the Syrian people. The narrative centers on eighteen-year-old Salama Kassab, a pharmacy student who, after losing her entire family, is compelled to work as a doctor at a besieged hospital in Homs.

III. KHAWF THROUGH THE LENS OF TRAUMA THEORY

To analyse Salama's experience, one must turn to the foundational framework of Trauma Literature. According to American literary critic Cathy Caruth trauma is not a simple event that happens at a specific moment, but an experience that is not fully grasped when it occurs, arriving belatedly in repetitive nightmares and flashbacks. Caruth states that it is "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly…" (4). In Katouh's novel, trauma takes a personified, extraordinary form: khawf, a visible hallucination of fear personified as a ghostly man visible only to Salama. Katouh directly establishes Khawf as an internal psychological response, noting that Salama's internal monologue: "The horror I see isn't confined to the hospital. My terror has mutated in my mind, bestowed with a life and voice that never fails to show up each night." (14)

Cathy Caruth's theoretical framework on trauma rests mainly on the notion of the Unclaimed Experience, wherein an overpowering incident cannot be fully absorbed into awareness at the moment of its occurrence. Caruth says that the traumatic incident returns belatedly, assaulting the survivor's psyche through involuntary intrusive recollections and sensory disturbances. In Salama's situation, the tragedy of losing her mother, father, and brother, along with the daily atrocities in the hospital, exceeds her immediate cognitive processing capacity. Khawf thus appears as the actual personification of this belatedness. He operates as a continuous, lingering ghost of the unintegrated past, repeatedly pushing Salama to confront the horrors she attempted to suppress. By visualising her trauma as a corporeal figure who speaks and reacts, Katouh dramatizes Caruth's thesis, illustrating how trauma refuses to remain buried in the subconscious.

In Katouh's novel, Khawf is not merely a villainous presence, but a psychological manifestation of PTSD, a radical coping mechanism triggered by extreme trauma. By subjecting Salama to continuous psychological torture, he weaponizes her deepest fears to erode her emotional resilience. This suffering is evident early in the narrative, as Salama describes how Khawf's voice serves as a constant, sensory-based reminder of her omnipresent psychological suffering, noting: "His voice reminds me of the freezing water I splash over myself when I come home drenched in the martyrs' blood. It's stones weighing on my chest, sinking me to the earth below."(14)

Crucially, this intense psychological suffering brought on by trauma serves as an adaptive coping strategy rather than shattering Salama's psyche. According to Judith Herman's well-known notion of hypervigilance, which is discussed in her book Trauma and Recovery, Khawf is the result of a survivor's inner sense of security being damaged. Khawf provides Salama with mental support rather than lethal indifference. Even though Khawf is an absolute villain in her terror dreams, all of these hallucinations serve a practical purpose by preventing emotional stagnation.

IV. THE LEMON TREE AS A SYMBOL OF HOPE

Salama's psychological landscape is dominated by Khawf, but Katouh contrasts this haunting fear with potent emblems of human connection and resilience. The central motif of the lemon trees represents continuity, deep-rooted Syrian identity, and the lingering hope of renewal despite

widespread destruction. The lemon trees bind Salama to her roots and a future worth living for, while Khawf captures the oppressive weight of the immediate present and previous grief. Furthermore, Salama's interactions with Layla and Kenan speed up her slow mending process. Genuine human interaction enables Salama to ground herself in reality while Khawf uses shared shame to maintain separation. Her need for Khawf as a protective illusion gradually wanes as her emotional ties grow, supporting Herman's claim that trauma rehabilitation is ultimately mediated through safety and relational reconnection.

V. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Katouh presents Khawf not as a malevolent entity that needs to be defeated but rather as an extreme psychological defence system. By his relentless horror, he paradoxically preserves Salama's physical life and sanity in a world of total destruction, proving that even her darkest hallucinations are intended to guarantee her survival.

Furthermore, Katouh's depiction of Khawf changes the way that trauma-induced hallucinations are interpreted in modern literature. Instead of viewing psychological anguish as merely a crippling symptom, the story highlights the mind's extraordinary ability to protect itself in times of acute danger. The book shows how the psyche can use fear as a weapon to preserve hope, agency, and an unwavering will to life in spite of external destruction by transforming internal suffering into a physical protector.

REFERENCES

[1] Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
[2] Herman, Judith. Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. Basic Books, 2015.
[3] Katouh, Zoulfa. As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2022.
[4] Zisser, Eyal. "The Syrian Revolution – The Failure of the Struggle for Social Justice and Freedom." Yearbook of Oriental Studies, vol. 68, no. 1, 2015, pp. 46–48.