

Psychological and Cultural Treatment of Traumatized Subject(s): Reading Laleh Khadivi's *The Walking* in Terms of Theories of Trauma

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received: August 11, 2021

Accepted: September 19, 2021

Volume: 4

Issue: 9

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2021.4.9.8

KEYWORDS

Psychological Trauma, Cultural Trauma, Collective, Memory, Multidimensional Theory, The Walking

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to scrutinize the concept of trauma in Laleh khadivi's work entitled, *The Walking*. The objective of the study is to examine how Khadivi's work can be read through theories of trauma. The Freudian notion of trauma focuses on the remaining psychological wounds on subjects' identity while Alexander's concept, cultural trauma, concentrates on the cultural outcome of a horrendous event at the collective level. Traumas are not solely private psychological experiences and are restricted to one solitude individual as they can expose themselves as collective experiences. Literary works are valuable properties picturing the results and outcomes of trauma both at its individual and collective level. In the current paper, concepts related to traumas will be defined to examine the characters in Khadivi's novel. The novel provides a set of chronological events that happened to a minority group during the Iranian revolution. The author chooses her characters of Iranians of Kurdish immigrants. *The Walking*, reminds us of events happening during 1976 in Iran, after The Islamic Revolution. The article will delineate that characters are psychologically traumatized after the revolution in Iran as well as experiencing cultural trauma during the twentieth century.

1. Introduction

As the dominant mode in modern literary studies, interdisciplinary studies pave the way for sociological and psychological literature studies. Theories of culture have drawn significant attention in the last decade. Campanian of Freud as a psychoanalyst and Jeffery C. Alexander as an anthropologist can draw the attention of thinkers' toward multi-dimensional theories regarding socio-psychological and socio-political events and movements. Literary works can be the resources reflecting the results and outcomes of a crisis in societies. Alexander made a model to interpret social phenomena, working on cultural trauma to revolve the interest of the carrier groups, competing for narratives on the identification of victim and delinquent, utopian and dystopian proposals for trauma resolution, the performative power of the constructed event and the distribution of organizational resources. (Alexander, 2004, p. 4)

This research is amongst the first comprehensive studies which investigate Khadivi's *The Walking* in detail. In order to achieve its given and predetermined goals, the study uses the theories of trauma proposed by Sigmund Freud and Jeffery C. Alexander. Types of wound, injury, shock or accident causing dysfunction of the body are considered trauma in medical science; provided that it has entered the body from the outside and the internal factor is not the cause of the injury. In other words, trauma is any injury caused by energy instability in the body. The invader energy may be impacted, mechanical, thermal (burn), chemical, or other types.

Psychological trauma "refers to the unbearable, untreatable, and unspeakable psychological wound remaining on the subjects' unconscious" (Hosseini and Baghaei, 2020, p. 131). These devastating consequences can be caused by war, which was the main case study for Freud. Concepts such as "cultural trauma" and "collective identity" are well drawn up within Jeffery Alexander's vision

on trauma from a social standpoint. He argues that traumas are not solely private psychological experiences restricted to one individual but can show themselves and appear as collective experiences.

Astrid Erll (2011), in her outstanding text, *Memory in Culture* maintains that cultural trauma is considered as one of the best ways to figure out how a specific event can influence a group's collective consciousness and identity (p. 151). Turning social events into memory can demonstrate Alexander's idea of cultural trauma; how a traumatic memory of a collective would appear in their identity. Erll (2011) states that literature can play two certain roles in studies of trauma and memory,

[...] its capability to suggest (as systems theory would formulate it) first- and second-order observations of the world at the same time (see Luhmann 2000a). On the one hand, literary works form versions of the past: affirmative and subversive, traditional and recent ones. On the other hand, they make this construction process observable and thus also subject to criticism. Literary works are memory-productive and memory-reflexive [...] (p. 151)

Eyes on the studies conducted on memory, Erll and a number of other scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs have strained to represent literature as a reflection of trauma and memory functions in the social realm.

Erll's conception of the literature role is yet the most favorable one for researchers. She maintains that literature can be a considerable collection of Subjects' memories and experiences that can be investigated in order to find how individuals have reacted to an event as a collectivity. She also urges about two vital roles that literature plays; first, its relation with trauma, second, as a medium including words to show the formation process of memories. In the first role, she deems literature as a container of memories and considering the second role. She observes literature as a way of visualizing people's experience by means of writing about an event.

2. Thesis Statement

The present study aims to investigate the issue of trauma and collective identity in Laleh Khadivi's *The Walking*, part of a trilogy. The study's primary objective is to illustrate how Khadivi's work could go under a critical reading with an eye on Freud and Jeffery C. Alexander's *Theories of Trauma*. *The Walking* provides a chronological sequence of events happening to a minority group; Kurd ethnicity of Iranians. Khadivi's trilogy, including *The Walking*, begins with the novel *The Age of Orphans*. It narrates a story occurring in Iran 1920s during Pahlavi era. The two other novels *The Walking* and *A Good Country* recounts events during 1976 and 2011 in Iran under a new political system: The Islamic Republic of Iran. Thanks to the exact chronological technique, the trilogy can well display how a certain minority ethnicity is treated during a specific period of time and how it is formed and affected by the external factors resulting from the changes and developments of the dominant society. The trilogy thus can give valuable hints on how different Kurdish generations grew up in Iran under the different political system.

3. Literature Review

Trilogy written by Laleh Khadivi, namely *A Good country*, *The Walking* and *The Age of Orphans* has not yet been investigated by the researchers to a great degree. The current reading puts its focus on the second volume of the trilogy, *The Walking*, resulting in opportunities to scrutinize previously proposed theories. The study can also be considered interdisciplinary research due to its combination of Sociological and psychoanalytical conceptual frameworks. This research is a qualitative study and its theoretical framework will be underpinned by Sigmund Freud and Jeffrey C. Alexander and the research sample includes Laleh Khadivi's *The Walking*. The research is mostly library-based since researchers will read the novel and interpret it based on previously proposed theories of trauma.

Regarding the date of Khadivi's novels, there is a lack of literature on her trilogy. The researchers thus focus on the available reviews written on the selected works. At the end of the Literature Review section, researchers will define the differences between the current and former studies. Dina Nayeri (2017) in *New York Times* argues about Khadivi's last novel in which the novelist writes about three generations of war, revolution and exile. A young man who has no stable and reliable identity decided to join Jihad. "Throughout the story, Rez's troubles center on his search for identity" (*New York Times*). The young man misses his identity after the Iranian revolution therefore he joins Jihad Islam in order to form a self-identity.

First, Rez wants to get along with those American classmates and the American culture, but he finds a sense of belonging to a different world inside himself by passing the time.

No doubt, Khadivi's novel will draw comparisons to Mohsin Hamid's much acclaimed 2007 book, "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," which also takes on identity, displacement, assimilation and radicalization. While the complexities in Hamid's novel are muffled by the allegorical voice of an unreliable narrator and the ruminating style of oral history, Khadivi's book is meticulous, unsparingly realistic and rich in nuance, a careful accounting of all those small nothings that, over three formative years, add up to everything for Reza Courdee. (Nayeri, 2017)

Alireza Courdee, the son of an Iranian Kurdish immigrant is first attracted by the American culture. At the surface level, everything seems calm and routine. It appears that Alireza has been completely integrated into American society; however, after few years, he searches for his lost identity and inclines to radicalization.

Abdulrazak Guranah (2017) in *The Guardian* states that cultural addition and impact of terrorism are the core concepts which are observable in *A Good Country*. The article illustrates how the characters in Laleh Khadivi's work lost their identity. Abdulrazak argues that Khadivi's works are of people who strive to be themselves by having their own true identity back. Terrorism caused many people to be afraid of specific groups in Iran. As a result, that group cannot have their true identity anymore. They are not themselves anymore. They cannot bear the fake identity of themselves anymore. The paradoxical situation rapidly reoccurs in Khadivi's works.

Salahadin and his older brother Ali searched for the sun after cloudy days. Mike Peed (2013) claims at *New York Times*, "Befuddlement is his retribution: 'These thoughts of time, its loss and gain, the knowledge that the days before no longer belonged and the days to come were unknown and blank, confused Saladin to the point of panic.' Khadivi's crystalline novel harbors no such disorder" (Peed, 2013). They were looking for a new life and homeland. They had a long journey to America with a utopian image of life in America in their minds resulting from the movies they had seen. The novel truly depicts the realities of life after immigration, removing the illusions and false images disparaged by movies.

Laleh Khadivi's trilogy has not yet been investigated by the researchers to a great extent. The current study is among the first studies which scrutinizes one of the novels from this trilogy with details. Previous readings and reviews on Khadivi's works are not much of details. They generally review the plot and highlight the text's political aspects in the shadow of an orientalist standpoint. The online articles selected as literature review lack a firm theoretical or conceptual framework offering a personal perception of their authors. On the contrary, the present study attempts to follow an academic structure of an article focusing on a theoretical literature review regarding types of trauma and their side effects.

3. Discussion

The trilogy recounts the story of three characters while sticking to the chronological aspect of the events. These three characters all live in a multicultural society but belong to three different generations. Each novel displays the cultural trauma which occurs in that society during a period and shows how the character's identities change regarding the trauma as time goes forward. This three characters Pejman (Reza), Saladin, and Alireza Rez as members of a collectivity all experience and face cultural trauma.

Pejman is the main character in the first volume of Khadivi's trilogy. When Pejman is born, he is surrounded by the typical elements of Kurdish society. He grows up in a Kurdish tribe, which always feel a strong sense of unity among themselves. He is treated with kindness and consideration. Just like any other Kurdish boy he is involved in a life replete with emotion and kindness. A caring and warmhearted mother, nice cousins and affection that can be felt everywhere is the environment which Pejman has around himself. It is his land, his homeland. But things changed. This land soon came under attack.

The novel mentioned has been written during the Pahlavi era. During the Pahlavi monarchy, a battle occurred between some Kurdish tribes and Iran's army at Zagros Mountains. Once the home of Pezhman's sweet dreams, Amazing Zagros Mountains turns into a battlefield full of brutality and bloodshed. Pejman and a number of others were orphaned in the battle. Pejman was conscripted by the central government. He also was renamed Reza. Pejman also married a Tehrani woman. The distance between Pejman and his identity and where he belonged becomes longer and longer. In the first section of the novel, it seems that the origin of Reza does not matter. It seems forgotten. His Kurdish identity and original language seem of no importance. But when Reza is sent to Kermanshah for a mission, his past is revived. Indifferent from his past, Reza now turns into a person who cares about it.

In *The Walking* novel, Saladin Khouirdi, a 17 years old Kurdish boy with his older brother Ali decide to leave Iran. After going through a lot of suffering and difficulties, they became separated from each other. Ali is reluctant to leave Iran but Saladin wants to follow his dreams which Hollywood movies have injected into his mind. Saladin faces different problems in a multicultural country but he cannot return. The natural contrast between Iran and the United States due to the sharp difference between these two countries in terms of history, culture, and norms has now been accentuated for political reasons. Iran, after the Islamic revolution and under the new political system, is against the US. The recent Iran hostage crisis in which a number of American diplomats and citizens were held hostage had created a bad atmosphere with respect to Iran and Iranians in the US. This research will investigate the concepts of cultural trauma and collective identity in this novel by means of cultural interference focusing on the events happening after the migration of Saladin to Los Angeles, California.

The last volume of Laleh Khadivi's trilogy *A Good Country* is a true synopsis to embody losing identity and cultural trauma. Alireza, a 14 years old boy, is the focus of attention. He spends his time with his white American friends. In the beginning, smoking, dope

and surfing became his habit. Even his name changes to Rez. At the age of 14, Reza is reluctant to mention his race and ancestral identity in order to integrate more into American society. Meanwhile, a new friend changes how Reza views his roots. He then conceives himself as the child of an immigrant family living in a country that does not belong. He gets more inclined to Islamic groups. As the novel goes forward, we feel a change in how Reza sees his identity. Meanwhile, the context of a multicultural society results in trauma for him. This novel well outlines the concepts of cultural trauma and the identity that is shaped through collective community.

Due to the delimitation of the current study, only the second novel from Khadivi's trilogy will be discussed in this article. In the following sections, first, the process of trauma in the novel is explained. Second, the process of change in the identity is mentioned. In order to do so textual examples from the novel are inserted in this mentioned. Concepts like multiculturalism, horrendous events, and cultural trauma are highlighted hereafter. Also, taking advantage of semiotic interpretation, the treatment of the subject's identity comes into the consideration. At last, conclusion generalized what has been said in two next sections.

The author says almost nothing about the revolutionary events themselves, concentrating instead on the lives and innermost questions, thoughts, and fears, of two Khouirdi brothers, ages nineteen and seventeen, who leave Iran secretly after a bloody incident involving their father, Reza from *The Age of Orphans*. The novel certainly pictures the multiculturalism since the brothers, Saladin and Ali, in the novel cover half of the world during their journey. The brothers caught up by the totalitarian army are a force to join the army in order to stay alive. The tension of the war and the revolution in the novel shows the collective side of the life of the brothers.

The first cultural glance of the novel comes on page 9, where the brothers talk about leaving Iran. "Yes. For our dignity. For our future. For a chance. This new regime is not capable of dignity. I heard just the other day, Mehri Khanoum was walking down the streets and they approached her, told her to wipe the vanity off her lips, a razor blade hidden in the napkin...just like that." This description is of importance for shows the inner side of the brothers. They are devoted to Kurd culture and are afraid of the change that happened in their routine life. This idea of life changes through the events Saladin and his brother experience through their journey to America.

The brothers decide to save their life in another way. "Kurds have always escaped through these mountains. We are no different. Even you, you who have lived in the cinema, you are no different. We will follow in their footsteps and there will be a place to stay, a place to hide for a few weeks and then we can go home. With honor, for honor" (39). This is the very first glimpse of the characters decision to immigrate. Ali trying to convince Saladin to take a shot for escaping from the struggling situation, speak of Kurd people and their closeness to mountains. They visit people through their journey and received service from in the cost of some days work. People met by the brothers represents the various cultures they become familiar with different cultures.

Back in their home, when their mother died, Saladin wrote about her and presented his words in the class.

I had a mother once. When she slept on her side, the weight of one breast made a line down the middle of her chest, like she had been folded in half. In the morning she drank dark tea and did not look anywhere but at her magazine and the bottom of her teacup and never at my father, who shouted loud enough to shake the windows. At night she smoked thin cigarettes and sang or cried or laughed, depending on the moon, she said. I had a mother who loved cinema and radio programs and me more than my brother. A mother who took me to my first cinema and the one after and gave me money to go by myself. I had a mother who stood far apart from my father, called him a coward, a weak captain, a man who could not provide for his family or send her to Tehran to buy clothes and see cinema. And then one day I had no mother and a father who was not as sad as I. (45)

The above extract shows how Saladin is grown by his mother. In fact, the mother picture here can be the representation of a house called Kurdistan. The subject's identity is dependent on its mother as it observes itself in unity with the mother figure. Then the father who represents an upper hand power, represents the central government that controls and sets rules for others.

Like *Odyssey*, and like that epic poem *The Walking* is also lyrical and deeply emotive, as Khadivi takes the brothers to a border crossing at a mountain lake, to the teeming neighbourhoods of Istanbul, and an island and an ocean archipelago. In Saladin mind, a quest to find the home is observable too. He describes his mother as familiar with goodness, supportive of the culture, and no more available. This matter points out to the remaining memory of the character, particularly related to the figure of Mother. In other words, the words highlight the notion of psychological trauma in the novel. The immigration causing separation of the character from the homeland is abandoning the subject from his original culture. Mother's protest against father represents how Kurds stood against Pahlavi Regime and worried for their culture and origin. His father being indifferent also shows that the country's higher power is not much concerned with Saladin's homeland and the way it is fragmented from time to time during history.

The Walking is simultaneously much narrower in focus and much more universal in its themes than Khadivi's other works. The conflict between the mother and the father is also a signal alerting the readers of a psychological trauma. The multiple cities Saladin and Ali go through represent a multicultural universe that best serves to dissolve minorities in culture. This quest shows the brothers the true essence of the world and how horrendous events everywhere are observable; wars, revolutions, and refugees everywhere shock the brothers. Moreover, the separation of Ali and Saladin, and the way Saladin fails in being in cinema left a traumatic wound on the memory of Saladin. Thus the revolution which forced Saladin to leave his homeland appears as a cultural trauma for Saladin. As Saladin is the representative of the Kurd people, it is fair to say that the revolution remained traumatic for the Kurds.

In the novel, Saladin's character rapidly changes which is a representation of the identity change. A Kurd subject devoted and in love with his homeland now lives in America speaking in English, dating a non-Kurd girl, and not even have a Kurd friend surely went through an identity change. All these show that the Islamic revolution in Iran cut Saladin roots from Iran, particularly Kurdistan. The climax of the change is represented in the novel as Saladin observes the changes in his dreams. The feeling of being a stranger, living in danger, and the recollection of memories in the storyline reminds the character of his experience of a traumatized scene.

A long time after his escape and fitting into the American lifestyle on the day while Saladin is thinking with himself says, Lucky the child who knows so little about here and less about there. Lucky the child left to fling her legs, let air and aspiration fill her heart. Unlucky the gathered crowd; men with heads bowed and women with hearts clenched, grandmothers who smack lips in disbelief over every bite: Doesn't taste the same, will never taste the same, how can it ever taste the same? (259)

The way after a while people regard toward immigrants change in the United States bothers Saladin unbearably. He observes the new generation of the immigrants' children underestimating and undermining the previous generation. America changed the identity of the young and even how it changed the refugees' identity.

For Saladin, America is no longer the dreamland. It let Saladin down. He is no longer a Kurd due to his experiences, and he never is considered an American due to his origin. As a horrendous cultural event, the revolution caused a multicultural facing in Saladin's life that led to a cultural shock. The named cultural shock ended in the change in the second immigrant generation. Thus, the traumatic event at its cultural level resulted in the identity change for the coming generation in *The Walking*.

4. Conclusion

The present study aims to scrutinize the concept of trauma in Laleh Khadivi's work entitled, *The Walking*. *The Walking* represents Islam as the core reason behind Iranian Revolution. Then this revolution appears as a forcing power upon Ali and Saladin, leading them toward a long journey. The journey itself is the source of cultural encounters in the novel. Meanwhile, rapid recollection of personal memories for the subjects stands as an experience of psychological trauma. The multicultural condition influences the characters' current subjectivity. The way the host culture, American culture, represents itself to Saladin is much different from what was expected, resulting in cultural shock. Days passing by, the consequences of the cultural shock grows in the subjectivity of the immigrants subject. The most important consequence of the shock, as shown in the novel, is the change in the character's identity. This is the way psychological and cultural trauma caused by the experience of a revolution is represented in Laleh Khadivi's *The Walking*. The paper thus provided a critical reading of Laleh Khadivi's *The Walking*, one of the novels from her trilogy that has not been thoroughly examined. Furthermore, since the novel concerns the life of a Kurd refugee after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, other researchers can go through the text considering other sociological theories as to their conceptual framework.

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