

## War, Trauma, and Feminist Consciousness in Katouh's Novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore the intersection of war, trauma, and feminist consciousness in Zoulna Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022). Katouh is a Syrian-Canadian novelist who is concerned about empowering female victims of their war trauma. The demonstration of the dynamic circumstances that suppress and challenge the protagonist, Salama, to navigate her gendered experiences during the Syrian civil war, makes the current study as intersectional study. Intersectionality is a common term that connects the involvement of race, gender, class, and sexuality, which complicates an individual's experiences in certain situations. Using Hooks' intersectional feminism and Herman's feminist trauma theory, the analysis reveals how Salama's suffering and resilience during the war may create a feminist consciousness that challenges both patriarchal oppression and Western misconceptions about Middle Eastern women. Using a qualitative textual analysis, this study selects and examines primary data from the novel to unfold the intersectionality. Key narrative moments were primarily gathered to uncover how Salama's trauma differs from that of her male counterparts due to the gendered burdens she bears. The study ultimately shows that her experiences of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and hallucinations are mainly intertwined with societal expectations and moral responsibilities. This situates her in a dual role, as a caregiver and a freedom fighter, intensifying her psychological and social struggles. Despite this burden, Salama's resistance to oppression and her active role in advocating for freedom, especially for women, may be considered as subversion against the dominant Western narratives that often regard Arab women as passive or voiceless. Her journey particularly exemplifies the transformative power of trauma, portraying that survival and resistance against the oppressive war are essentially feminist acts. Katouh's novel thus offers a fresh perspective on feminist resistance within the context of war, showing how trauma can catalyze empowerment and social change while also revealing that Salama's exceptional survival cannot represent the many women whose suffering remains unheard and demands a more inclusive feminist response. This research contributes to broader discussions on gendered trauma in conflict zones and encourages further interdisciplinary and comparative studies to explore unexplored themes that may expose urgent humanitarian concerns affecting women in war-torn regions.

**Keywords:** gender; Intersectional Feminism; literature; resistance; trauma; war.

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### INTRODUCTION

In literary works, war is a theme that is often associated with men through the lens of military and masculinity (Hutchings, 2008). It offers limited perspectives from other significant parties, such as war victims, who are merely considered as numbers. In the recent contemporary era, war-themed literary works that portray victims' experiences in haunting situations have gradually risen. Many writers began to narrate stories from the side of war victims (Scutts, 2012; Winter, 2006; Pedelty,

2020). Female writers took the opportunity to raise women's suffering under the horrors of war. Trauma then becomes a highly-narrated topic through psychologically-damaged characters.

The writing of traumatized female characters in war-themed novels involve observation from the perspectives of feminism and psychology. Although the psychology of women at first received skepticism from the perspective of mainstream psychology, there must be different systems of metaphors to recast the relationship between those two fields (Marecek, 1995). Fortunately, there have been more varieties of recent publications in journals covering feminism and psychology. It is found that, "Key problems, such as sexualities; identity and subjectivity; embodiment and the body; marriage; violence; mental health; issues regarding sexual minorities; and parenting have received substantial attention" (Macleod, Marecek & Capdevila, 2014). Moreover, critiques from a feminist psychological perspective suggest the serious application of the "institutional trauma" idea, advocating the importance of socio-political understanding to decouple trauma from individualized sufferings (Thompson, 2021). It shows how external aspects add significant influence on the formation of trauma. A critic orates that the misuse of trauma discourse as a form of cultural capital reinforces existing hierarchies and patriarchy (Britt and Hammett, 2024).

Trauma, as in traumatized female characters, also plays a connecting role in both psychology and literature. Despite the sorrow embedded, trauma can be the turning point where women change pain into self-knowledge (Heidarizadeh, 2015). When traumatized characters become the main focus, literary works portraying the Middle Eastern socio-cultural context become relatable. In the critical stylistics analysis of Fadia Fajar's *My Name is Salma* and Ahdaf Soueif's collection of short stories, *Aisha, Amara and Omar* (2018), it is found that language and expression cannot fully narrate the traumatic experiences of the characters in the stories. This resulted in readers' concern to rather look at the gaps in which language is unable to deliver traumatized people's devastating experiences. They also found that Arab-British women writers deal with traumatic memories of home, the problem of exile, and the constant search for identity, where traumatized characters point to their in-between subject position. Ullah (2020), who analyzed Atiq Rahimi's *Earth and Ashes* (2002) using the trauma theory of Caruth, Herman, Tal, and LaCapra, also obtained similar findings. It portrays how flashbacks of the characters' traumatic memories contribute to and are in line with the historical facts of Afghanistan's Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989, as depicted in the novel.

Jena and Samantray (2021) also examined how narrative techniques shape diverse traumatic events within contemporary literary works. Haghshenas and Anushiravani (2022) analyzed mental disorders and characters of women in two novels, i.e., Masoud Behnoud's *The Knot in the Rug* and William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979), using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Results showed that both female characters were traumatized by the war. However, they turned out to experience worse suffering by becoming victims of patriarchal societies, as it prevented them from coping with war and its effects. The above studies show how war and patriarchy intersect in creating oppression.

Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (2022) serves as one of the novels that highlights how war affects the main female character and trauma she experiences. Set in the Middle East, Katouh's novel was said to be inspired by a historical event, namely the Syrian Civil War (2011). This novel shows the horrifying situation felt by the female main character named Salama Kassab, an 18 year-old pharmacy student who lost everything to war and has to dedicate her life to saving victims in the hospital, while fighting her trauma. Since the story was based on real-life events, it is concerning how as victims, women experience the tormenting moments of war. According to reports from International Governmental Organizations to Non-Governmental Organizations, women in Syria experienced various kinds of suffering. There are at least three types of oppression they have experienced, i.e., gender-based violence, detainment and forced disappearance of women, and violation of human rights by targeting women activists (WILPF, 2016).

This paper argues that Salama, the female main character, has awakened her feminist resistance through her trauma. Thus, the study will explore: 1) how Salama's experience as a woman in war shapes her trauma differently from men; 2) in what ways the novel challenges Western feminist narratives about Arab women; and 3) how Salama's transformation from a reluctant medical worker to a self-empowered woman reflects feminist resistance. To answer these questions, the analysis will employ Hooks' intersectional feminism (1984) to examine the layered oppression

Salama faces and Herman's feminist trauma theory (1992) to explore how war trauma shaped her feminist awakening.

Examining how a female protagonist is portrayed in a contemporary war-themed novel provides a different perspective on how women are perceived. Although female characters often experience psychological trauma, as analyzed by Ayaicha et al. (2022) in Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* (2003) and *The Japanese Lover* (2010), their coping strategies help them survive. Women in these novels deal with trauma by acting out and remaining resilient. Similar situations have occurred in reality; for example, Mozambican women refugees in South Africa endured war during the 1970s and 1980s. Sideris (2003) found that they faced psychosocial outcomes, where gender significantly influenced their violent experiences. The conflict affected their spirits, social connections, and physical health. However, these women are not just victims but active agents who contribute to war, whether as fighters or helpers. Additionally, Budryte (2025) analyzed how Lithuanian women, who participated in the anti-Soviet war after World War II, actively aided other partisans and fought both as combatants and messengers. The Lithuanian women were considered 'heroic subjects' as defined by the institution. They endured torture and deportation to different regions. Some women, however, betrayed their supposed allies by collaborating with the Soviets.

Furthermore, Stewart (2015) has examined novels, such as Sarah Waters's *The Night Watch* (2006), Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life* (2013), and Alison MacLeod's *Unexploded* (2013), highlighting the roles of British women during World War II. These novels reveal both the opportunities and limitations women faced, reflecting on the gains and losses during the war. Additionally, Abshavi and Haj'jari (2021) found an interesting point in Paul Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008). Though the novel doesn't focus specifically on women, the study emphasizes the diverse roles women played during wartime, including victimization and profound shifts in identity. It also highlights the silent contributions of women, offering a pro-feminist perspective on war.

The studies mentioned above demonstrate that the role of women in war, both in fiction and real life, is a compelling topic from various perspectives, including psychology and feminism. Therefore, the novel *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* was selected for this study, as it addresses the themes of war, feminism, and the resilience of its female protagonist. This research combines feminism and psychology to explore how war and trauma intersect in shaping the protagonist's development of feminist consciousness. While Salama's PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) has already been discussed by Marantika and Litaay (2024), focusing on its symptoms, causes, and effects, this study examines Salama's process of turning trauma into power, which then becomes the key to her feminist awakening. This research also differs from Aliyya's (2024) analysis, since it uses Freud's psychoanalytic approach to investigate her personality structure and character development. Therefore, the novelty and gap this research addresses will enrich the diversity and complexity of war literature through the lens of feminism and psychology.

## METHOD

This research employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine the feminist awakening of Salama, the protagonist in Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*. Drawing upon the narrative structure of the novel, the study systematically extracts data to facilitate an in-depth analysis through the application of Bell Hooks' intersectional feminism and Judith Herman's feminist trauma theory. The framework of intersectional feminism enables the interrogation of the varied oppressions, encompassing gender, cultural identity, and socio-political contexts, that influence Salama's experiences. Concurrently, Feminist Trauma Theory offers a lens to analyze the role of war-induced trauma as a catalyst in Salama's transformation from a reluctant participant in medical relief efforts to an empowered symbol of feminist resistance. Moreover, this study problematizes Western feminist narratives by foregrounding a culturally-specific articulation of feminist agency and resilience as depicted in the novel.

Since this research is based on textual analysis, the authors carefully and thoroughly read the novel multiple times. In collecting the data, various narratives and dialogues between the characters, including Salama, were selected from this 414-page novel. Once the data were collected, the authors then applied the theories by examining them to support the findings and conduct a nuanced analysis. All the results were presented in different points of discussion to separate the findings and clarify

the uniqueness of each sub-heading. Other relevant references were also included to provide a broader understanding, especially in the context of the Middle East, where the story is set. Finally, after matching the data and the theories, a conclusion was drawn to summarize the overall analysis and offer further suggestions.

## ANALYSIS

*As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* tells a story from the perspective of a female war victim named Salama during the Syrian civil war in 2011. The war begins as a result of people's qualms about a dictatorial government under the Bashar al-Assad regime. They face atrocities and destruction from the ongoing conflict between the military government and the people's freedom fighters, called the Free Syrian Army. A year before the war broke out, Salama was a pharmacy student living in Homs. She pursued her education to become a successful pharmacist. She has a complete and loving family consisting of her, Mama (her mother), Baba (her father), Hamza (her older brother), and Layla, her best friend, who married her brother, Hamza. Everything seems fine and beautiful until the war takes her happiness away. She lost her family, dreams, and hopes.

Losing family, living under a destroyed house, bearing trauma, and treating the wounded have almost crushed her hope. Those traumatic events have sequentially impacted her psychological condition. When she was hesitant about the decision to stay in Syria or flee to another country, she met Kenan, the man who was supposed to be her husband if the war does not occur. Being with Kenan, she found him to be a perfect match for her. They shared similar ideas, hobbies, and perspectives. From this point, she began to raise her fighting spirit.

### War and Gendered Trauma: A Feminist Trauma Perspective

#### *The Psychological and Gendered Burden of War*

In the story, Salama was expected to continue protecting her sister-in-law, Layla, leading the household and caring for the wounded at the hospital amid her unstable psychological state. Unlike male characters like Kenan, Hamza, Baba, or other male side characters, whose roles mainly involve fighting or serving the country (the land), Salama has to consider many things. The promise she made to her family to stay alive weighs heavily on her and causes anxiety:

... I would put my family's safety above everything. Whoever was left of it (Katouh, 2022, p. 23).

Her dual roles also reflect what most women face due to the high mortality rate among men during armed conflict or wartime. Buvinic et al. (2013) found that the impacts of conflict zones can either decrease or increase pre-existing gender inequalities among the affected civilians. While men are heavily affected in mortality numbers, women and children bear the displacement and become refugees, leading them into poverty. This finding reflects what Salama has gone through. She has to move from her destroyed family's house to her brother's and Layla's house:

I finally catch a sight of my home and my chest expands. It's not the one I once shared with my family; it's the one Layla gave me after a bomb fell on my own. Without her, I'd be out on the streets" (Katouh, 2022, p. 4).

Her internal displacement, combined with her dual roles, highlights the real-life challenges women face. In many cases, "Women respond to decreases in household income by increasing their hours of work, entering the labor force, or adjusting their time and effort in the home" (Buvinic et al., 2013). Seeking refuge then becomes the safest option for them to stay alive. As mentioned earlier, Salama turns herself into an unpaid laborer working as a medical worker. Even though she does not get paid, she still benefits from the free medication that the hospital provides as a reward for her dedication.

Psychological trauma's central dialectic occurs within the conflict of the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud (Herman, 1992). The Syrian war, where the context of the story takes place, reflects a condition where a dictatorial regime holds absolute power. From the perspective of socio-cultural conditions, Salama and other war victims are unable to voice their

experiences of trauma since such voices threaten the government's power, which will then increase the number of silenced and unrecognized victims. Salama's experiences of war trauma then highlight both psychological and gendered burdens.

Katouh depicts Salama's trauma by associating her psychological experiences, such as having anxiety, delusions, and hallucinations. The hallucination is symbolized by the appearance of a man named Khawf, who haunts Salama in every way possible:

He was a hallucination who had come to stay. One who, every night for the past seven months, has cruelly plucked on my fears, breathing life into them (Katouh, 2022, p. 16).

Besides hallucination, Salama also experiences delusions. Her denial of reality has created fabrications of memories of her loved ones. She unconsciously makes a delusion of Layla, a sister-in-law and her only best friend, who has already passed away. When the realization hits her, it radiates how her sense of self has been disrupted:

My sobs are dry, heaving painfully through my chest, and I can't form coherent words. I've been living alone since October. For five months my mind has been spinning a fiction to keep my agony sealed away (Katouh, 2022, p. 308).

All her trauma from losing her family to constantly living in an unsafe environment leads to her having complex PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). As Herman (1992) argues, "Prolonged, repeated trauma can occur only when the victim is in a state of captivity, under the control of the perpetrator". This explains why Salama's psychological condition is dysfunctional:

...I fell pretty hard on my head that day and, I don't know, maybe a head injury coupled with my PTSD has affected the relationship between my brain's frontal lobe and sensory cortex... (Katouh, 2022, p. 278)

In the above explanation, Salama is burdened by her trauma and condition, being the only one left in the family while actively performing as a medical worker. Thus, transforming her sufferings into agency becomes nearly impossible. However, at the end of the story, she manages to reclaim her power by resisting the oppressors.

The psychological burdens, combined with the gendered burdens she must endure, reflect the ways female protagonists' moral injuries are often depicted in contemporary war literature. VanderWeele et al. (2025) describe persistent distress as arising from personal experiences that disrupt or threaten one's sense of the goodness of oneself, others, institutions, or higher powers, as well as one's beliefs or institutions concerning right and wrong, or good and evil. Based on this definition, Salama's intense lingering guilt for "failing" to protect her mother and Layla – which later led her to develop PTSD and experience moral injury. She believes her failure makes her a bad person. She blames herself for something beyond her control. The anxieties she developed afterward stayed with her for a long time.

Compared to previous studies, Ayaicha et al. (2022) explained that Lakshmi, the protagonist in *The Rice Mother*, suffered from psychological distress caused by losing her daughter, Mohini, to the Japanese soldiers. Her moral injury stems from this traumatic event, leading her to remain in denial for a long time before finally acting by continuing to support her family. Another female protagonist from *The Japanese Lover*, whom she also analyzed, exhibits the same pattern of moral injury, since both novels were written by the same author. Like Lakshmi, Parvati experienced similar events, including trying to protect her daughter. The difference is that while Lakshmi failed to save Mohini, Parvati was able to prevent Rubini from being caught. This feeling of guilt is similar to what Salama experienced, as previously explained.

While female protagonists in the findings of Ayaicha et al. (2022) have an almost similar type of moral injury, which is based on guilt, Abshavi and Haj'jari's (2021) did not explicitly mention the moral injury that the women characters have in the analyzed story. Auster's *Man in the Dark* mainly portrays women as having significant contributions in wars. However, it also mentions the suffering these women endured, such as executions, captivity, torture, and sexual harassment, which are

common in real war situations, just like what is portrayed in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* through Salama's narratives. Although this research does not cover the women characters' moral injuries, it can still be inferred from their traumatic experiences that are possibly leading to their psychological distress. Similarly, in Stewart (2015), the three novels analyzed depict British women's lives during the Second World War, when the concept of Home Front was established. *The Night Watch* by Sarah Waters's female protagonist, Kay, experienced similar psychological distress. Kay, a female ambulance driver during the war, felt disappointment and alienation. She also had trauma from something she witnessed. Kate Atkinson's *Life after Life*'s character, Ursula, took her own and her daughter's life in the story. The storyline of this novel seems to be speculative and contains many fictional elements, since it is told that after she took her daughter's life, she was reborn. One thing is for sure that the war she experienced damaged her life. Another novel is *Unexploded* by Alison Macleod, with Evelyn as the protagonist. The author found that Evelyn had anxiety, a troubled family, which may have added to her psychological distress, and thoughts of suicide. These three novels' protagonists are indicated to have trauma, with anxiety being the most prominently-felt feeling.

Additionally, real-life events discussed by Budryte (2025) found that two women, Vilutiene and Lauriniene, who participated in the Anti-Soviet partisan war as partisan messengers, experienced moral injuries, such as betrayal by other women partisans. Along with the feeling of being betrayed, these women also experienced cruelty from being messengers in the partisan war. This led them to have trauma both from the betrayal and the cruel things they received. Similarly, Sideris's (2003) findings on women's moral injuries are most similar to those of Salama. Mozambican women refugees whom she interviewed experienced distress caused by the war, combined with other cultural and social practices that heavily burdened women. The conflict caused them to lose dignity and social belonging due to the sexual violence they received, the displacement, and the separation from daily practices (e.g., having a subsistence economy from the agriculture sector). Most of the women in fictional stories and real-life events who were victims of wars have moral injury coupled with some other psychological distresses, just like Salama. The gendered burdens, like those of Mozambican women in Sideris (2003), are a significant factor in damaging women's inner realm.

### ***The Feminist Implications of War Trauma***

Being a woman in a situation of war creates a greater chance of being oppressed. The feminist movement that brings up the trauma of war victims is highly needed, especially for women who are often seen as collateral damage. Sadly, a study shows that people experiencing psychological trauma may suffer from episodic amnesia that alters investigation periods to oblivion periods (Herman, 1992). Once the political moment passes, trauma research is often ignored or repressed. Therefore, Katouh, through Salama's character in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*, opens up the experiences of those war victims who were unable to voice their stories.

This novel portrays how war has made women into even more objected targets. War reinforces patriarchal expectations of caregiving, positioning her as a reluctant medical worker forced into servitude. While having a damaged psychological condition, Salama still manages to serve her people in the hospital. Her actions below show how she implements feminism as a form of resistance. She starts by having a sense of survival in resisting oppression:

I set the saucepan on the pine coffee table in front of us and stare at my hands. The criss-cross slashes of scars covering them are the marks death left when he tried to take my life. Some are faint, silvery, while a few are more ragged, the new flesh still looking new despite the fact they've healed. They're a reminder to work faster, to push through the exhaustion and save one more life (Katouh, 2022, p. 8).

The injuries she gets from losing her family and taking care of the victims are seen as a reminder to work harder to save people. Although those injuries simultaneously remind her of the traumatic events she has been through, they do not prevent her from conducting humanitarian activities.

For Salama, being a war victim is indeed tormenting. She has gone through trauma and oppression, yet is concerned about her motherland's condition. While she thinks it is important to

fight for freedom, it is also important to seek safety. Her precious moment for meeting Kenan, the man she fell in love with, has strengthened her goals to continue pursuing the dreams she once aimed for. She argues that leaving Syria and moving to a better place is justified and cannot be judged:

I take a deep breath. 'I don't know who told you that leaving is a cowardly thing to do, but it's not. Saving yourself from people who want to murder you isn't cowardly' (Katouh, 2022, p. 168).

'The fight isn't over, and it's not only here. Syria's entire history has become faded in people's memories. They don't know what a gem she is. They don't know the love this country has. You owe it to them. You owe it to us' (Katouh, 2022, p. 229).

Fighting for freedom cannot only be done from the inside. This argument of Salama shapes her motivation to do an act of activism, where she tries to tell the world what is happening in her country:

'Come to the hospital to record the injured. You say you want to help, right? Show the world what's happening? Well, nothing screams injustice more than that. The protests are usually at night. And because it's dark, the visibility isn't that good. But at the hospital you'd ... It'll be more impactful' (Katouh, 2022, p. 110).

Salama believes in the notion that "small things matter" by making every possible effort she can to ensure and build up her resistance acts. As she suffers from war, then becomes more optimistic. Thinking optimistically means having never-ending hopes. It reflects how important it is for war victims to have hope, even a tiny bit. Her activist spirit doesn't end when she manages to flee from Syria. She continues to do more for the sake of the victims, by writing articles and making videos, so that the world knows what she and her people have been through in Syria.

Women war victims often meet difficulties in opening up their trauma to somebody else. Moreover, if they experience a certain degree of mental illness that cause them to be silent, it takes great courage to willingly reveal their pains. The paragraph below shows how Salama bravely tells Kenan about the unspoken truth she has been holding in. Salama's act suggests that any war victims openly express their feelings without being scared of being judged or rejected:

I look up at him and try to keep my breathing steady. I'm not ashamed of who I am and the struggles I go through. Khawf is an integral part of my life who has shaped so much of who I have become these past months. I won't deny that it would feel like a punch to the gut if Kenan flinched away from me after I tell him. But if we are to have our version of a real life together, I don't want to start with a lie (Katouh, 2022, p. 277).

The decision not to be ashamed of what she has done or gone through reflects why victims are not just numbers, as each holds precious stories. Salama's bravery to unfold her repressed restlessness must be an example of self-confidence, because hiding from flaws means surrendering to helplessness.

A young woman like Salama is often unable to voice her will for freedom from oppression. It is known to be hard for war victims to deliver their arguments and ideas to overpowered institutions. Before finally leaving Syria, Salama decides to join a demonstration anniversary. The same movement which took away her father and brother:

This decision clears my mind. I want to be a voice to join my people. I want to sing my sorrows away. I want to mourn our martyrs. This may be the last time I'll ever feel as if I'm part of Syria before the boat whisk me away. I don't want this fear anymore (Katouh, 2022, p. 244).

As someone who supports independence, Salama joining the demonstration indicates that she has accepted every consequence. It is highly courageous to make efforts to get rid of the fear that she feels during her time as a medical worker and someone who has lost her entire family. Being haunted by trauma does not immediately make her afraid to do small actions before leaving her

country. The repetitive circumstances, going to the hospital, treating victims, and returning home with trauma, have made her tired and strengthened her at the same time. The wounds she receives from the atrocities of war have transformed into a reminder of how she has endured enough and not given up.

### **Intersectionality and Oppression: The Gendered War Experience**

#### ***Oppression at the Crossroads of War and Patriarchy***

According to Hooks (1989), oppression is multi-dimensional. She emphasizes that racism, class, and gender create different experiences of oppression for women. Mainstream Western feminism only focuses on the universality of problems, which somehow leads to discrimination. If other groups of women are unfree, no group of women are free (Hooks, 1989). Black women and other marginalized groups face different oppression than those in U.S. or European countries. While gaining gender equality might only be what Western women need, other groups of women have to face broader cultural gender norms which double up their subjugation.

Salama faces not only the trauma of war but also cultural gender norms that dictate women's roles. War has created even more oppression for Salama, since she experiences more than just being a victim, but a caregiver and a subject of male military soldiers. This condition places her in a position of compounded vulnerability, revealing how gender and war intersect in shaping her oppression. Salama represents what female victims experience in most war situations. Women victims are seen as weak objects and are always oppressed. One obvious example is how the government, through military soldiers, targets pregnant women and little girls or even babies:

'This is where the pregnant women stay. We can't use any sedatives on them because we wouldn't have enough for the surgeries. We've lost - some didn't make it. The worst is when the mother dies but the baby lives. The babies are there.' I point towards the other room adjacent to the hall (Katouh, 2022, p. 126).

'I don't like coming here. Seeing them so small and defenseless, it's too much. Some were pulled out of their mothers' wombs and need the incubators to survive. Others are a few months old and sick' (Katouh, 2022, p. 127).

Pregnant women in war situations meet tragic fates. Many of them suffer injuries from bomb or gun attacks. If they need surgery, the hospital that receives them does not have painkillers. The situation will be even worse and more painful if the baby they are carrying is still alive, but their mother has died. The method used is to remove the baby from the womb without using anaesthesia. In addition, other female victims also experience sexual harassment and violence. Salama once experienced this traumatic event when the military attacked the hospital:

Terror freezes my blood. Being a girl and a pharmacist makes me a special kind of target. I'll be accused of helping and healing rebels. I'll be tortured with the very tools I use to save people. I'll be raped (Katouh, 2022, p. 340).

I grab a discarded basin and fling it at the soldier's back. It promptly hits him and clatters to the floor. Silence settles over the atrium, broken only by the soldier's grunt of pain. My arm shakes as the soldier turns slowly (Katouh, 2022, p. 341).

The soldier's forearm presses against my throat, holding me tightly in place, a squeeze away from being strangled (Katouh, 2022, p. 341).

Instead of submitting, Salama resists and never surrenders. She fights the soldier with every last drop of her blood. The soldier insists on strangling her while uttering humiliating words like 'you should be put like a bitch' (Katouh, 2022, p. 345). Fortunately, the Free Syrian Army breaks in at the right time, and Salama can be saved.

Such degrading words spoken by the male soldier imply how low and powerless women are in the majority of war situations. Moreover, women are less trusted by people to lead on big matters.

When Salama tells the wounded victims to leave the hospital because she predicts a dangerous situation, all the people in the hospital express doubt:

'Everyone!' I yell, and all the faces turn towards me, recognition flickering in some. 'Leave the hospital now, it's not safe!' (Katouh, 2022, p. 355).

For a few precious seconds, they glance at one another with unease (Katouh, 2022, p. 355).

Frustration builds inside me. It's because I'm a teenager. They're more reluctant to listen. It's not easy for some of them to move, because they're missing limbs, and others are hooked to IVs. Many are children and elderly (Katouh, 2022, p. 355-356).

People doubt her because Salama is a young woman. It would be different if it were a man who commands. Salama's courage and confidence to lead have debunked the stereotype that says women are weak and cannot think fast.

### ***Challenging Western Stereotypes of Arab Women***

Western feminism often portrays Middle Eastern women as passive victims of oppression. It aligns with why Hooks (1984) criticizes Western feminism for excluding another marginalized group within the frame of feminism as a whole. This resulted in discrimination against races and genders outside the White people spectrum. Edam, Shaari & Aladdin (2023) found that Western media, in headlining Arab women, tend to portray negative sides by emphasizing and stereotyping their religious beliefs, i.e., Islam. Therefore, it is understandable if Western people tend to be cynical about women's resistance in Middle Eastern countries, especially those who are victims of war or conflict.

As a Syrian diaspora writer living abroad, Katouh is concerned with how she and other individuals of Middle Eastern descent are perceived. While residing in Switzerland, she became aware of the limited understanding among many people in Europe and the West regarding the realities of the Syrian conflict. This awareness motivated her to present the situation in a narrative form, leading her to write a young adult novel centered on a Syrian girl and the circumstances that compel individuals to become refugees (Writer's Digest, 2022). Katouh critiques Western perceptions that tend to stigmatize Syria primarily as a site of political instability, neglecting its historical role as a center of civilization that made significant contributions to global knowledge and science. Instead, dominant Western discourse often concentrates on the arrival of Syrian refugees and the perceived burdens faced by host countries. Through her war narrative, Katouh seeks to depict the trauma experienced by war victims with honesty and respect. She deliberately avoids diminishing the pain endured by her protagonist, viewing such minimization as a disservice to the lived experiences of real Syrian victims. Ultimately, Katouh aims to represent the struggles faced by the Syrian people, particularly women, in a manner that is as authentic and faithful as possible.

Salama is not merely a victim; she makes choices, resists, and ultimately reclaims agency on her terms. She shows empowering acts in many of her decisions, such as by choosing to continue serving the wounded despite having trauma. Her determination to fight for her people reflects a strong will to bravely tell the world what her people have struggled with. Constantly resisting by protesting the oppressor, fighting the harasser, and protecting the disabled has transformed her pain into even greater power. She then succeeds in reclaiming her agency by embracing imperfections and wounds to seek security and safety by leaving Syria without being a coward.

Katouh has delivered a strong message to the Western world that Arab women are not as weak and submissive as they thought. Salama's character representation "slaps" those who still look down on other marginalized women's sufferings. The patriarchal gender norms that occur in war situations can be challenged if a determined character like Salama never stops actively resisting and develops persistence.

## Feminist Awakening as Resistance

### ***Reclaiming Agency through Feminist Resistance***

Salama experiences multiple traumatic events that contribute to the development of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Her recovery therefore requires several supportive conditions. According to Herman's (1992) trauma theory, healing occurs through three main stages: establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma narrative, and restoring survivors' connections with their community. However, these stages are difficult to achieve while Salama remains under conditions of oppression and ongoing armed conflict. Hence, being in Syria can only slow down or even obstruct the process of fixing her psychologically-damaged self. Salama's acts of resistance by fighting atrocities and oppression in the above findings become her starting point for trauma healing. It fills the first step, which requires the survivor to become the author and arbiter of her recovery (Herman, 1992).

Stage 1 of trauma recovery deals with safety and stabilization, by regaining physical and emotional security. Before she meets Kenan, Salama's psychological condition was worse. Her days are filled with witnessing traumatic events, from bombings, shootings, and losing family. Within this period, she experiences shocking moments which disrupt her mental health and cause hallucinations and delusions. Nonetheless, she keeps her routine as a medical worker, hiding her trauma while saving the victims. After meeting Kenan and falling in love with him, she begins to regain her sense of self. She starts hoping to rebuild her dreams, which were shattered by the war. Herman (1992) argues that confronting and integrating traumatic experiences requires a supportive social environment that validates and safeguards survivors while fostering a shared alliance between the victim and witnesses. Kenan plays a role in stabilizing her mental state. He is the emotional safety that Salama needs to gradually return to her consciousness. This can be proved by how Salama starts being vocal about her people's struggles while forming a plan to leave Syria.

Stage 2 of Salama's trauma recovery is related to the revelation of the fact that Layla, who has been by her side all this time, is just a delusion that she created due to mourning. Kenan has helped lift Salama's denial of reality for the second time by bringing her senses back. It resulted in her ability to recognize and sort out her trauma in a more structured way. Salama's realization of the delusion for a moment has shaken her decision to leave Syria. Fortunately, Kenan manages to persuade Salama to strive for it:

'You know you were hallucinating Khawf, but you thought Layla was alive,' he murmurs. 'I'm worried for you. Staying here, in the place where she died, it'll only make it worse. You won't be able to help anyone if you don't help yourself first' (Katouh, 2022, p. 314).

It is therefore understandable that Salama's mental state has been deeply affected. Living under constant oppression and repeated exposure to trauma and injury has slowly planted fear within her, allowing it to settle in her subconscious rather than pass as a temporary emotional response.

Lastly, Stage 3 deals with how Salama finally reconnects to the world and reclaims agency. Fleeing from Syria and starting a new life supports Salama's recovery. This happens because trauma recovery needs a relationship context that denies any isolation (Herman, 1992). After successfully leaving and settling in another country, Salama continues to fight for the victims of war by making videos about the horrors felt by the victims. In addition, she also tries to improve herself by continuing her pharmacy education and establishing relationships with the diaspora community:

I shudder in a breath, nodding before walking into the living room. To distract myself, I contemplate whether to read a pharmaceutical book or work on a new video. After arriving in Berlin, Kenan picked up where he left off with his activism and, after a few more videos, he began to garner the world's attention. I practiced my English by joining him, writing articles and making videos about what we faced in Homs. I threaded our stories together, and at first, it was difficult. I'd burst into tears five seconds into a monologue, remembering the feel of a corpse's cold body (Katouh, 2022, p. 413-414).

Although Salama's PTSD and other remnants of her trauma still have not completely disappeared, when a war victim continues living normally, it is more than a good sign. Salama's journey from being oppressed to resetting a new life reflects her transformation from a reluctant survivor to an active agent of change, aligning with feminist resistance. Her survival, decisions, and refusal to conform to patriarchal roles become radical feminist acts. They empower women victims to rise from the darkness and not surrender to oppression.

### **Intersectional Feminism in War**

The dictatorship regime that led Syria to war has caused a chain of atrocities against its people. Women and children become the objects of oppression. Beglari (2024) explains how the subjugation of women is one of the tools used by many dictators to maintain control. They limit women's movements and participation in society by suppressing their rights, as Hooks (1992) has said that "There is power in looking" at degrading gender equality. Limiting women in certain aspects resulted in a negative representation in the media. Therefore, Middle Eastern women are often viewed as powerless entities who submit to men. Other marginalized groups also face challenges, as the Western feminism movement did not equally include all races. Black women's rights and respect have been taken away from their bodies and souls (Hooks, 1981, p. 7). Hooks' view on her race being in a different class suggests that patriarchy is done differently. Eventually, these realities show how patriarchal acts are highly related to class representation and the dictatorial government where men hold the supreme power.

Women's victimizations that are shown in *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* pages 127 and 340 (Katouh, 2022) reflect how war strengthens patriarchal norms. Male soldiers who put women down do not receive much condemnation, as if it has become something common. Moreover, Salama's effort to save the wounded by commanding them to leave the hospital, as seen in pages 355 to 356, shows how untrustworthy a woman is in the eyes of society. All the facts above show that women would feel more oppressed when in a war situation. Gender differences between men and women greatly influence the response of society, especially those related to leadership and trust.

The feminist consciousness that awakens inside Salama's soul is driven by how war has forged her into an optimistic woman. The horrifying experiences she has gone through reveal how gender, war, and cultural expectations intersect in creating multi-layered oppression. Society's expectations of women who serve the community are not seen as something special but rather as something ordinary. Her sacrifice for being a medical worker does not receive any appreciation. Instead, the trauma that is rooted in her soul is what keeps her moving forward. The scars that remain on her body are silent witnesses that the world does not bother to look at. The view of how women of her country are represented makes her struggles feel like a voice echoing in a closed chamber. Nevertheless, her will to transform suffering into power illustrates her success in holding agency, even in the most oppressive situations.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study highlights how *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* redefines feminist resistance within war literature, a common term widely recognized in literary genres discussing themes like war, trauma, resistance, history, etc. Salama's story challenges both patriarchal norms and Western feminist stereotypes, illustrating how war trauma can catalyze feminist awakening. Katouh's novel offers a powerful feminist message: survival, defiance, and reclaiming agency are all acts of resistance in themselves. Though in her story, trauma serves as a positive trigger, its damages cannot be ignored. Salama's success in gaining power is not comparable to the suffering she has gone through. Her case is one in a million compared to what women might encounter in real-life conditions. The world needs to realize that many women are not as lucky as Salama. Feminism should be more active and diversely address their unheard pains.

Based on these findings, future studies would benefit from looking at this topic through a broader and more integrated lens. Combining literary analysis with insights from trauma studies, gender studies, and Middle Eastern studies can offer a deeper and more compassionate understanding of how war, trauma, and feminist resistance are intertwined in women's lives. Comparative research across different conflicts and regions may also help reveal how feminist

resistance is shaped by cultural, religious, and political realities. Ultimately, such work can contribute not only to academic knowledge but also to more nuanced global conversations about Middle Eastern women, challenging stereotypes and encouraging more thoughtful approaches in humanitarian and feminist activism.

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