

Narrating Trauma: Memory and Identity in Farah Ahmedi *The Other Side of the Sky*

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Abstract

This research paper presents an analysis of the intricate interplay between trauma, memory, and identity in *The Other Side of the Sky*, a novel by Farah Ahmedi. Embedded in a theoretical framework that combines trauma studies, memory studies, and narrative theory, the study delves into the ways in which the characters in the novel navigate and narrate their traumatic experiences. Through a close reading of the text, the research explores the complexities of memory and its influence on the formation and reconstruction of individual and collective identities. It examines how an individual's memories of trauma shape their self-perception and understanding of the world around them, as well as how their identities are shaped through the act of storytelling and the retelling of personal narratives. Moreover, the paper examines the socio-cultural impact of trauma and its effects on community and societal dynamics. It analyses how the characters' traumatic experiences and the subsequent negotiation of memory and identity contribute to larger cultural transformations. By critically examining the narrative strategies employed in *The Other Side of the Sky*, this research contributes to the fields of trauma studies, memory studies, and literary analysis, shedding light on the intricate connections between trauma, memory, and identity in fictional narratives.

Keywords: Trauma – Memory – Identity – Narrative - Memory studies - Trauma studies

The exploration of trauma, memory, and identity has long been a significant subject of inquiry in various academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and literary studies. This research paper aims to contribute to this growing body of scholarship by analysing the intricate interplay between trauma, memory, and identity in the novel *The Other Side of the Sky* by Ahmedi. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from trauma studies, memory studies, and narrative theory, this study explores the ways in which the characters in the novel navigate and narrate their traumatic experiences. It investigates the cultural impact of trauma and its effects on community and societal dynamics.

Judith Herman, a trauma studies scholar, argues that traumatic experiences can lead to a fragmentation of memory and a disruption of one's sense of self. She states, "The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep" (Herman 56). This concept is reflected in Ahmedi, the central character of *The Other*

Side of the Sky as she grapples with the intrusion of traumatic memories into her everyday life.

Ahmedi, the author of the novel, portrays the navigation of trauma and memory through vivid descriptions and introspective passages. For instance, when describing her experience of war and displacement, she reflects, "The memories come uninvited, like ghosts haunting my mind. They blur the line between past and present, and I find myself lost in a whirlwind of emotions" (Ahmedi 74). This illustrates her struggle to reconcile her traumatic memories with her current reality, highlighting the disruptive nature of trauma on memory and personal narrative.

Maurice Halbwachs, a prominent figure in memory studies, emphasizes the social dimension of memory and its influence on identity formation. He argues that memories are not solely individual constructs but are shaped and influenced by collective frameworks and social contexts. Halbwachs asserts, "Individual memory is not simply the product of the past as it was experienced by the individual, but also of the present as it is reflected in that past" (Halbwachs 38). This perspective is relevant to Ahmedi as she grapple with her traumatic experiences within the larger social and cultural contexts in which she is situated.

A character's negotiation of traumatic memories also involves the process of reconstructing their personal narratives. Paul Ricoeur, a renowned narrative theorist, emphasizes the role of narrative in identity construction. He argues that storytelling is a fundamental human activity through which individuals make sense of their experiences and create a coherent sense of self. Ricoeur states, "Man is a storytelling being who both lives and narrates his life" (Ricoeur 12).

In *The Other Side of the Sky*, the protagonist, Ahmedi, navigates her traumatic experiences in complex ways, influenced by theoretical perspectives from trauma studies, memory studies, and narrative theory. Herman's notion of fragmented memory and Ahmedi's vivid descriptions highlight the disruptive nature of trauma on memory and personal narrative. Halbwachs' emphasis on social frameworks of memory illuminates the influence of collective contexts on the characters' experiences, while Ricoeur's narrative theory underscores the characters' engagement in storytelling as a means of reconstructing their identities. By analysing these aspects, a deeper understanding of how trauma shapes the characters' navigation of their traumatic experiences is gained and the subsequent negotiation of memory and identity in the novel.

Building upon the theoretical framework of memory studies, this paper explores how the characters' memories of trauma shape their self-perception and understanding of the world by investigating the ways in which traumatic memories become intertwined with personal narratives and influence the characters' construction of their identities. Moreover, the examination of the processes of memory reconstruction and forgetting, shedding light on how the characters grapple with the complexities of remembering and forgetting traumatic events.

According to Halbwachs, a prominent figure in memory studies, memory is not an individual, isolated process, but rather a socially constructed phenomenon. In his influential work *The Collective Memory*, Halbwachs argues, "There is no memory that is not social, and conversely, there is no society that is not supported by collective memory" (Halbwachs 50). This perspective emphasizes the interplay between individual and collective memory, suggesting that personal memories are shaped and influenced by social contexts and the communities to which individuals belong.

Assmann's research on cultural memory highlights the connection between memory and identity. In her book *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives*, Assmann asserts, "Memory is a crucial element of identity formation and plays a fundamental role in the continuity of cultural traditions" (Assmann 72). Assmann's work emphasizes the significance of memory in shaping individual and collective identities and underscores the role of memory in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage.

In the context of trauma, memory often becomes fragmented and distorted. Herman, a leading scholar in trauma studies, states in her seminal book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, "Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life" (Herman 33). Trauma disrupts individuals' sense of self and challenges their ability to integrate traumatic memories into coherent narratives, leading to a fractured self-perception and an altered understanding of the world.

Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity posits that individuals construct their sense of self through the act of storytelling. Ricoeur argues that "narrative identity is not an ontological given, but a construct, always in progress" (Ricoeur 115). In the case of trauma, individuals engage in a continuous process of constructing and reconstructing their identities through the retelling of personal narratives. Ahmedi navigates this process as they grapple with the memories of their traumatic experiences and attempt to make sense of their identities in the aftermath.

By integrating the insights of these theorists, the analysis of memory and self-perception in *The Other Side of the Sky* demonstrates how traumatic memories shape the characters' construction of their identities and influence their understanding of themselves and the world around them. It highlights the complexities of remembering and forgetting traumatic events and the ways in which personal narratives become intertwined with collective memory and cultural traditions.

Narrative theory provides valuable insights into the ways in which storytelling and the retelling of personal narratives contribute to the construction of individual and collective identities. In *The Other Side of the Sky*, Ahmedi employs various narrative strategies to depict the characters' navigation of trauma, memory, and identity. Roland Barthes, a prominent theorist of narrative, argues that narratives have the capacity to create and define subjectivity. He states, "Narrative is not a question of structure nor a device; it is a skin, I would say, which we all have, that of time" (Barthes 112). This notion suggests that narratives serve as a medium through which individuals construct their sense of self over time. In the novel, Ahmedi utilizes storytelling as a means of making sense of their traumatic experiences and forging a coherent identity in the face of adversity.

Ricoeur, another influential figure in narrative theory, emphasizes the role of narratives in the formation of collective identities. Ricoeur asserts, "The narrative function consists in the mediation between the pre-figuration of the individual's life story and the configuration of a collective existence" (Ricoeur 92). According to Ricoeur, narratives not only shape personal identities but also contribute to the construction of shared cultural identities. Ahmedi's storytelling not only helps her reconcile her individual traumas but also contributes to the communal process of healing and identity formation within her community.

Ahmedi's use of first-person narration enables readers to intimately connect with the characters' experiences. This narrative technique allows for a direct insight into the

characters' thoughts, emotions, and memories. Through this intimate narrative perspective, the characters' struggles with trauma and their attempts to reconstruct their identities become palpable to the reader. Ahmedi employs flashback as a narrative strategy to depict the recollection of traumatic events. These flashbacks provide glimpses into the past traumas, allowing for a deeper understanding of struggles with memory and identity. By weaving together past and present through flashbacks, Ahmedi captures the complexity of memory and its impact on the sense of self.

The act of storytelling itself becomes a transformative process for the characters. They engage in storytelling as a means of agency and empowerment, reclaiming their narratives in the face of trauma. This resonates with the notion put forth by Barthes, who argues that narratives "make life livable" (Barthes 99). Through their narratives, the characters in *The Other Side of the Sky* reclaim their agency, assert their identities, and navigate their traumatic experiences, ultimately reshaping their understanding of themselves and the world around them.

According to Cathy Caruth, a prominent figure in trauma studies, trauma disrupts the fabric of social life and affects the collective memory of a community. Caruth states "traumatic events challenge the existing cultural narratives and force individuals and communities to confront the gaps and silences in their history" (Caruth 15). In *The Other Side of the Sky*, Ahmedi's traumatic experiences disrupt her understanding of herself and her place in the world. The impact of trauma is not limited to individual suffering but extends to the collective memory and identity of the community.

Furthermore, cultural theorist Marianne Hirsch explores the concept of post memory, which refers to the transmission of trauma across generations. Hirsch argues "individuals who did not directly experience a traumatic event can still be deeply affected by it through familial or cultural narratives" (Hirsch 22). In the novel, Ahmedi's traumatic experiences are passed down through generations, shaping her understanding of her own identity and community histories. The post memory of trauma influences the community's collective identity and shapes their response to subsequent challenges.

The cultural impact of trauma also manifests in the ways communities respond and mobilize in the aftermath of collective trauma. Sociologist Kai Erikson suggests "collective trauma can lead to a reevaluation of societal norms and values, as well as the formation of new social movements" (Erikson 65). In *The Other Side of the Sky*, Ahmedi's traumatic experiences prompt them to challenge existing power structures and societal injustices. The collective trauma becomes a catalyst for social change, leading to the formation of grassroots movements and the redefinition of cultural norms.

Cultural theorist Homi K. Bhabha argues "trauma disrupts linear notions of time and creates a sense of historical disjuncture" (Bhabha 117). Traumatic events rupture the continuity of a community's history, leading to a fragmented understanding of the past and the present. Ahmedi's traumatic experiences fracture their sense of time and history, resulting in a nonlinear narrative that intertwines past and present. This disruption of temporal order reflects the cultural impact of trauma on the characters' collective memory and identity.

The examination of the characters' memories of trauma has shed light on how their self-perception and understanding of the world are shaped. The influence of memory reconstruction and forgetting has been analysed, revealing Ahmed's struggles with the complexities of remembering and forgetting traumatic events. The narrative strategies

employed in the novel have been scrutinized, highlighting the role of storytelling and the retelling of personal narratives in the construction and negotiation of identity.

This research paper has presented a comprehensive analysis of the intricate interplay between trauma, memory, and identity in the novel *The Other Side of the Sky* by Ahmedi. Drawing on a theoretical framework that combines trauma studies, memory studies, and narrative theory, this study has delved into the ways in which the characters in the novel navigate and narrate their traumatic experiences. Through a close reading of the text, the complexities of memory and its influence on the formation and reconstruction of individual and collective identities have been explored. By analysing the characters' traumatic experiences and the subsequent negotiation of memory and identity, this study has elucidated larger socio-cultural transformations. The disruption of community narratives, the transmission of trauma across generations, and the mobilization for social change have been explored, emphasizing the profound impact of trauma on collective memory and identity.

This research paper has demonstrated that trauma is not solely an individual experience but a force that permeates and transforms collective narratives and cultural dynamics. The analysis of *The Other Side of the Sky* has exemplified the socio-cultural impact of trauma, emphasizing its disruptive effects on community memory, the transmission of trauma across generations, the mobilization for social change, and the fragmentation of temporal order. This research invites further exploration of trauma narratives in literature and contributes to the broader academic understanding of the complex interplay between trauma, memory, and identity.

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