The Perpetual Nakba: Postmemory in Suheir Hammad's *Born Palestinian, Born Black & the Gaza Suite* (2010)

Amal El-Sayed

Assistant Lecturer,
Faculty of Al-Alsun
(Languages), Ain Shams
University, Egypt.

Abstract

Postmemory is the transmission of collective trauma across generations via storytelling, photos, or objects. Such transmission of generational trauma is often found within diasporic communities that were forcibly uprooted from their homeland. The Nakba refers to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine that led to the displacement and expulsion of over 7000 Palestinians in 1948. It is a tragedy that upended the course of Palestinian history, initiating a cycle of trauma that continues to this very day. The echoes of this trauma can be seen in the postmemorial works of the Palestinian diaspora. These works serve as a reminder of the Nakba's horrific legacy of pain, consequently acting as a counter-narrative to any attempt at erasing or changing history. This paper examines the concept of postmemory in selected poems from Suheir Hammad's (1973-) *Born Palestinian, Born Black & the Gaza Suite* (2010). The methodological framework of this paper draws on the theory of postmemory in the writings of Eva Hoffman, Marianne Hirsch, and Stephen Frosh. By tracing the features of postmemory in Hammad's poems, the paper explores how Hammad not only manages to convey the terror of the Nakba but also highlights its continuous effects on Palestinians worldwide. The paper additionally relates Hammad's poems to the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip in 2023, thus attesting to the perpetual nature of the Nakba.

Keywords: Palestine, Gaza, memory, trauma, postmemorial

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> *"[W]e're never alone, and I always eventually turned to see my ancestors by my side."* (Suheir Hammad, *Born Palestinian, Born Black & the Gaza Suite* 12)

Introduction

Postmemory refers to the transmission of traumatic memories to the descendants of trauma survivors. The term was first coined by the literary scholar Marianne Hirsch (1949-) in her paper "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory" (1992). Postmemory occupies a contentious space between memory and trauma studies since it examines how traumatic memories can be passed down across generations via stories, photographs, or objects. Unlike memory which originates from the recollection of real events that happened to the individual, postmemory stems from the reimagining of traumatic events that other people have experienced. Members of the postgeneration often produce postmemorial works that reimagine the past in an attempt to bear witness to its traumatic events. The Palestinian Nakba of 1948 is a traumatic event that resulted in the expulsion of more than 7000 Palestinians from Palestine, adding to the growing Palestinian diaspora. The effects of the Nakba still echo in the postmemorial works of the Palestinian diaspora, especially due to its continuous nature. This paper examines selected poems from Suheir Hammad's (1973-) *Born Palestinian, Born Black & the Gaza Suite* (2010) through the lens of postmemory. The paper endeavours to trace the features of postmemory in the selected poems in an attempt to shed light on how the Nakba's legacy of suffering continues to reverberate in the minds of different generations of Palestinians to this very day. The paper also explores the Nakba's perpetual nature by drawing parallels between the poems and the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip in 2023.

Theoretical Framework

Eva Hoffman's (1945-) *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (2004) is one of the first books to address the intricacies of being a member of the postgeneration. Hoffman defines the second generation as "the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is transmuted into history, or into myth" (xv). The definition underscores the ethical responsibility that the postgeneration is tasked with. By bearing witness to the trauma that their parents have experienced, they ensure that history remembers these atrocities. Indeed, there "was a deeply internalized duty not to let diffusion, or forgetfulness, or imaginative transformation, dilute the condensed communications" of the first generation (Hoffman 14). This Sisyphean burden of preserving traumatic memories is shared by members of the second generation who are bound together by the collective trauma that their parents experienced. Hoffman describes the second generation as an "imagined community" (28) that is connected by a shared traumatic history which "threaten[s] sometimes to overshadow and overwhelm [their] own lives" (25). One of the most prominent features of postmemory is thus the transmission of familial memories of trauma that continue to eclipse the lives of the postgeneration.

Hoffman describes postmemory as a process of avowal—the opposite of Freud's

disavowal. Freud defines disavowal as a strategy in which "the ego . . . finds itself in the position of fending off some demand from the external world which it feels distressing . . . [It is thus an] incomplete attemp[t] at detachment from reality" (Freud 60-61). In contrast, avowal is a strategy whereby one vows to "remember, identify with, defend, and idealize something extremely disturbing that [they] have not experienced" (Hoffman 176-77). Members of the second generation of trauma survivors often find themselves engaging in the process of avowal through the imaginative reconstruction of their parents' traumatic memories. Identification with trauma survivors through imaginative empathy is therefore yet another feature of postmemory. Hoffman argues that members of the second generation should examine the memories of their parents "through retrospective reflection" (196). This reflection creates a critical distance that allows the second generation to assess past events from a new stance.

Hoffman notes that postmemory is often relayed in familial settings in fragmentary bits and pieces. Memories of traumatic events "erup[t] in flashes of imagery; in abrupt, fragmented phrases; in repetitious, broken refrains" (Hoffman 9), later "lodg[ing] themselves . . . like shards" (Hoffman 11) into the minds of the members of the second generation. This image of traumatic memories as prickly shards brings to mind the etymology of the word *trauma* in Greek, meaning a physical wound. Hoffman's description implies that the transmitted memories are akin to a physical wound, suggesting that postmemory includes the transmission of pain as well as memories. The legacy that is transmitted in postmemory is thus psychological rather than historical. Indeed, the traumatic history that was passed down to the second generation "was not a processed, mastered past, but the splintered signs of acute suffering, of grief and loss" (Hoffman 34). Such loss is the crux of what the second generation inherits, as they experience the agony of the loss without experiencing the trauma itself. Indeed, "transferred loss, more than transferred memory, is what children of survivors inherit" (Hoffman 73). This loss can result in a permanent state of melancholia if the members of the second generation internalize the traumatic past of their parents. Postmemory is thus characterized by a sense of fragmentation, loss, and suffering. Hoffman concludes her book by highlighting how the second generation should move on from the trauma of the past after acknowledging it or else they will be engulfed by the shadows of the past.

Having coined the term in a paper in 1992, Marianne Hirsch (1949-) further expounds on the concept of postmemory in her book *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012). Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (*Generation* 5). The definition highlights two very distinct features of postmemory that set it apart from memory. First, postmemory cannot be documented or recorded; it can be only passed down through storytelling, photographs, or distinct patterns of behavior. Second, it is not based on recollection but on the use of imagination in recreating the events of the past. Similar to Hoffman, Hirsch cautions against letting postmemories permeate each aspect of the lives of the postgeneration: "To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even

evacuated, by our ancestors" (*Generation* 5). This can lead to a "'transposition' into the world of the past" (Hirsch *Generation* 83), dangerously blurring the lines between the survivors and their descendants. Therefore, Hirsch urges the postgeneration to find a balance between identification and distance.

Hirsch elaborates on how photographs and objects serve as mediums to access postmemory. Such mediums are often inherited from family members, functioning as "points of intersection between past and present, memory and postmemory, personal remembrance and cultural recall" (Hirsch and Spitzer, "What's Wrong" 61). These photographs and objects thus help to bridge the gap between those who have experienced the trauma and those who inherit it. Hirsch and Spitzer especially underscore the significance of "'testimonial objects' [that] carry memory traces from the past, . . . [and] testify to the historical contexts and the daily qualities of the past moments in which they were produced" ("Testimonial Objects" 178). These testimonial objects are embedded with layers of memory, serving as a legacy of trauma and a testament to the resilience of its survivors. Hirsch concludes her book by focusing on the archival nature of postmemory. The archive is "understood in Michel Foucault's terms as the set of hegemonic rules that determine how a culture selects, orders, and preserves the past" (Hirsch, *Generation* 228). Postmemory is part and parcel of most archival projects which "attempt to reconstruct, through photographs and through stories, violently destroyed worlds and communities whose very records were targeted for erasure" (Hirsch, *Generation* 233). In the same vein as archival projects, postmemorial works often feature testimonial objects, archival photographs, and familial stories of trauma with the aim of preserving history and counteracting its erasure.

The concept of postmemory is further discussed in Stephen Frosh's (1954-) *Those Who Come After: Postmemory, Acknowledgement and Forgiveness* (2019). Though Frosh acknowledges Hirsch's contribution to the field, he considers the term *postmemory* to be problematic, as "defining oneself and one's era only in relation to what has gone before ('post') risks evacuating the present of meaning" (Frosh 12). Frosh also questions what is meant by *memory* in *postmemory*, as the postgeneration does not have access to actual memories. Yet, one can argue that the term *postmemory* embodies the effect that postmemory has on the postgeneration, as memories of the past supersede those of the present. Frosh, however, proposes using the notion "of 'haunting' and ghostliness" (11) to describe the process of transmitting memories since it "embraces the sense of being occupied by something that has come from another place or time and is usually not willed by the person subjected to it, but somehow *possesses* that person against her or his own conscious intentions" (11). Such possession by the memories of the past is another characteristic of postmemory. Yet, this possession is quite dangerous, and Frosh strictly warns against over-identifying with the survivors of traumatic events. Interestingly, Frosh widens the scope of postmemory by noting that such possession could be a result of "imaginative identification" (175) rather than transgenerational ties. Such imaginative identification could occur when someone examines a postmemorial work. Indeed, one of the "function[s] of creative work might be to help us imagine what it is like to have gone through things that we have not actually encountered ourselves; this can be seen as part of the ethical function of art" (Frosh 176). Frosh thus includes the recipients of postmemorial works as members of the

postgeneration who are tasked with the ethical burden of witnessing.

Frosh's book is primarily concerned with how postmemory is intrinsically tied to the ethics of witnessing. Though there is an ongoing dispute regarding the incommunicability of trauma, he maintains "that the experience of trauma is in some way communicable to others, but in a fragmentary, literalised or 'enacted' form rather than as narrative or what might be termed coherent testimony" (Frosh 30). This recalls Hoffman's description of postmemories as fragmented shards, reinforcing the fragmentary nature of postmemory. Though trauma is quite often too complex to be communicated within a traditional framework of language, Frosh underscores our ethical responsibility to witness it. He introduces the strategies of recognition, listening, and speaking out as crucial to the process of witnessing. Recognition "means being mobilised by the situation[,] to turn towards it rather than away from it" (Frosh 65). Frosh encourages adopting this strategy as a "necessary component of nonviolent resistance" (74), cautioning against using violence as a strategy to avenge those who were wronged in the past. According to Frosh, recognition should be followed by listening which involves providing a safe environment for the survivor. Indeed, "the first task of the witness might be to find a way to communicate that the speech of testimony can be endured" (Frosh 149). The postgeneration should not follow the urge to turn away from witnessing suffering. Instead, they should acknowledge it, endure it, and speak out against the atrocities of the past. Speaking out, "not by a victim but by the witness[,] addressing her or his own community to insist it takes a position of responsibility for others" is also a vital strategy. Recognition, listening, and speaking out are thus distinct strategies that characterize postmemorial works. Frosh concludes his book by reinforcing the importance of working through transgenerational memories instead of fixating on them, allowing the survivors and their descendants to move forward.

It is clear that postmemory is a controversial concept that draws on memory studies and psychological studies. Hoffman examines postmemory within the framework of psychoanalysis, highlighting its impact on the psyche of the second generation. She underscores how postmemory is characterized by the transmission of familial memories of trauma that are saturated with fragmentation, loss, and pain. In contrast, Hirsch explores postmemory within the framework of memory studies, tracing how postmemory is transmitted through different mediums such as familial stories, testimonial objects, and behavioural cues. Frosh investigates postmemory in relation to psychoanalysis, memory studies, and ethics studies. His book is specifically concerned with the ethics of witnessing, as he provides different strategies to honour trauma survivors such as recognizing, listening, and speaking out against past traumas.

The Perpetuity of the Palestinian Nakba

Postmemory has often been linked to the survivors of the Holocaust, a traumatic event that is ingrained in the minds of Jews all around the world. Similarly, the Palestinian Nakba of 1948 is a horrific event that is etched in the minds of Palestinians and Arabs alike. Yet, there are very few scholarly works that examine the Nakba through the lens of postmemory. This is largely due to scholars "shy[ing] away from criticism of Israel out of a misguided sense that to defend the Palestinian right to self-determination and thus to question the current basis of the Israeli State might be taken as evidence of 'anti-Semitism'" (Ball 5). This paper, however, relates the concept of postmemory to the

Nakba, which refers to the mass displacement and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by the newly-established state of Israel in 1948. It culminated in "the destruction of more than 450 Arab villages and towns . . . and the forced expulsion of more than 780,000 Palestinians" (Saloul 1). This expulsion resulted in the formation of the Palestinian diaspora around the world. The Palestinian poet Fawaz Turki describes the Nakba as "a cataclysm when a whole people was detached from its homeland and inexplicably, incomprehensibly, relegated en masse to a world of nothingness" (4). The description highlights the magnitude of the Nakba's impact, as it bequeathed a gaping loss instead of a homeland to generations of diasporic Palestinians.

It is crucial to note that most Palestinians view the Nakba as an ongoing catastrophe. Indeed, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish describes it as "an extended present that promises to continue in the future." The Nakba included a string of massacres that resulted in gruesome carnage: Deir Yassin massacre, Abu Shusha massacre, Tantura massacre, Lydda massacre, and Al-Dawayima massacre. This horrific rampage of massacres did not stop with the Nakba. Instead, Israel continued to slaughter innocent civilians throughout the years: Qibya massacre (1953), Kafr Qasim massacre (1956), Khan Yunis massacre (1956), Sabra and Shatila massacres (1982), Al-Aqsa Massacre (1990), the Ibrahimi Mosque massacre (1994), and the Jenin Refugee Camp massacre (2002).[1] Israel additionally continued its ethnic cleansing of Palestinians through a series of evictions, the latest of which were the evictions from Sheikh Jarrah in 2021 and Masafer Yatta in 2022. The Nakba is thus perpetual so far, as its horrific legacy keeps repeating itself throughout the years over and over again.

The Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip in 2023 is but a culmination of the Israeli attacks on Gaza throughout the years, as Israel carried out several attacks on Gaza in 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021. These horrendous attacks resulted in the deaths of thousands of Palestinians and the expulsion of hundreds from their homes. Gaza "is not only an integral part of Palestine, it is the only . . . [part] that survived the 1948 Nakba without either being absorbed into Israel or annexed by Jordan. There was no place for an entity like Gaza in the Zionist plan, which is a major reason for the extreme brutality that Israel has visited on the territory's population" (Filiu 59). Gaza has often been described as an "open-air prison"[2] due to the high density of population in such a small strip of land. Furthermore, a very strict economic blockade was enforced on the Gaza Strip after the military takeover of Hamas in 2007, restricting the movement of people and goods. In retaliation to the Hamas attack on the 7th of October, Israel imposed a "total blockade" on Gaza, closing "access to food, water, electricity, medical supplies and sewage treatment for the territory's 2.3 million residents" (Schmunk). The current Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip acutely exemplifies the terror that Palestinians continue to experience to this very day. The Nakba never ended; it is still ongoing, as Palestinians continue to be oppressed on a daily basis. Indeed, "[f]or the Palestinians the meaning of this war consists in being subjected to continual uprooting, in their transformation into refugees on their own land and beyond it, [and] the attempt, following the occupation of their land and history, to banish their existence" (Darwish). Regrettably, this is precisely what is still happening in Palestine. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East has reported that Israel's invasion of Gaza in 2023 resulted in the deaths of "at least 30,878 Palestinians" and the internal displacement of "1.7 people" from their homes (UNRWA). Yet, Gaza

remains a symbol of perseverance and nationalism amidst Israel's vicious onslaught.

Postmemory in Suheir Hammad's *Born Palestinian, Born Black & the Gaza Suite* (2010)

Suheir Hammad (1973-) is an American-Palestinian poet and political activist. Born to Palestinian parents in a refugee camp in Jordan, Hammad grew up in the US being acutely aware of her people's plight. For Hammad, writing is an act of resistance and a means of activism. In the author's preface to her memoir *Drops of This Story* (1996), she writes: "After all this time, I'm still writing. So that our stories be told . . . So that we don't forget. So we always remember" (Hammad). This quote suggests that her works are postmemorial, as they are written with the intent to preserve the legacy of the past. Hammad's first volume of poetry *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996) is one of these postmemorial works, as it sheds light on the struggles of the Palestinian people. The 2010 edition of the volume includes a collection of new poems under the heading: The Gaza Suite. In his introduction to the volume, Marco Villalobos notes that Hammad's poems "consider a plight to which she is inextricably linked, without the trauma of primary experience, but with the observations of a first-hand witness to its longing, rage, and injustice" (16). The quote exemplifies how Hammad is a member of the diasporic postgeneration of the Nakba, as she witnessed the effect of the traumatic memories of the Nakba on her parents. It is notable that Hammad's poems lack capitalization and punctuation, thus appearing fragmented and at times incoherent. This fragmentary nature of language is often found in postmemorial works. Indeed, when it comes to writing about trauma, "[t]here was a kind of prohibition on the very quality of coherence. To make a sequential narrative of what happened would have been to . . . normalize through familiar form an utterly aberrant content" (Hoffman 15). In this sense, Hammad's poems refuse to follow any kind of consistent rhyme or stanza division in an attempt to relay the fragmentary nature of trauma. This paper traces the salient features of postmemory in selected poems from Hammad's *Born Palestinian, Born Black & the Gaza Suite* (2010).

Hammad's poem "the necklace" transforms the personal into the political by situating the story of Hammad's family within the historical context of the Nakba. Hammad opens her poem with Frosh's strategy of recognition by describing the survivors of the Nakba as "survivors of horror" (Hammad, *Born* 40), thus acknowledging the trauma that her parents have experienced. She assumes the role of the storyteller, recounting how her father from "citylydd" gifts her mother "from ramleh" a "necklace for their engagement" (Hammad, *Born* 40). The reference to Lydda and Ramle alludes to the Lydda Death March in 1948 which was a deliberate attempt at ethnic cleansing during the Nakba, "account[ing] for a full one-tenth of the Arab exodus from Palestine" (Morris 82) and resulting in the death of hundreds of Palestinians from "illness, thirst and exhaustion" (Masalha 76). The joyful union between Hammad's parents stands in stark juxtaposition to Lydda and Ramle's shared fate, underscoring the perseverance of Palestinians in the face of trauma. Hammad introduces yet another allusion when she describes the necklace as the "charred bone of der yassin's massacre" (Hammad, *Born* 40), presenting it as a testimonial object that is embedded with the traumatic memories of the past. Der Yassin's massacre "was the site of the most notorious mass murder of Palestinian civilians in 1948" (Masalha 80). Hammad's allusion to these two traumatic events showcases how the "children of those directly affected by

collective trauma inherit a horrific . . . past that their parents were not meant to survive" (Hirsch, *Generation* 34). Indeed, she relays the traumatic memories of expulsion and decimation that her parents have barely survived to a wider audience. Furthermore, the allusions attest to the perpetual nature of the Nakba as Palestinians continue to witness mass expulsions and massacres to this very day. Indeed, "the specter of forced mass expulsion looms over the enclave's more than 2 million inhabitants, as Israel's bombardment of the Strip . . . forces them to flee south" (Serhan). This highlights how the current Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip echoes the Nakba's horrific legacy.

Hammad presents the necklace as a symbol of the resilience of Palestinians. Though the embedded memories of the necklace "sea[r] [her mother's] skin" and "bur[n] her breast," her "gazelle neck w[ears] it / perfectly" (Hammad, *Born* 40) in defiance, showcasing her commitment to carrying the legacy of her ancestors despite the pain that comes with it. Even during her pregnancy in exile, she "kne[els] / to clean [the] floors of her refugee home" with the "weight of the necklace laid / heavy against her belly" (Hammad, *Born* 41). The images underscore her mother's perseverance amidst the trauma of displacement and exile. Overlayed with the traumatic memories of the Nakba, the necklace functions as a testimonial object that "survive[d] the ravages of time and the destruction wrought by violent histories" (Hirsch, *Generation* 247). Hammad describes how she could hear the necklace's "jangle of beads" while she was still "inside [the] womb" (Hammad, *Born* 41). The description of events that happened prior to one's birth is a clear feature of postmemory.

The necklace—with all its symbolic weight—tangles in Hammad's hair, causing her pain just as she caused her mother and signifying the transmission of trauma from mother to daughter. The jangle of beads, representing Palestinian history, "tell[s] [her] stories of these two / soul surviving villages" (Hammad, *Born* 41). Stories are yet another medium of transmission, as postmemory often begins with "disconnected units of narration, the most dread-inducing of family stories" (Hoffman 12). Hammad concludes the poem by highlighting that despite all the horror that they have endured, her parents remain resilient. They do "what survivors of struggle do / to one another" (Hammad, *Born* 42), passing their traumatic memories to their descendants. Indeed, her parents divide "the necklace into three" parts: "one for Suheir / one for suzan / one for sabrine" (Hammad, *Born* 42). By dividing this testimonial object amongst their daughters, Hammad's parents pass the burden of carrying the legacy of Palestine to future generations. In this instance, the necklace "testif[ies] to . . . the ways in which material objects carry memory traces from one generation to the next" (Hirsch and Spitzer, "Testimonial Objects" 178). Passed down as a family heirloom and a testimonial object at once, the necklace is an emblem of Palestinian legacy. The poem thus exemplifies the crux of postmemory as it portrays how traumatic memories can be transmitted across generations through testimonial objects and storytelling.

In her poem "taxi," Hammad documents the atrocities that the Israeli army has committed against Palestinians throughout the years. The speaker addresses an ambiguous figure whom she calls an "urban warrior" (Hammad, *Born* 26), jostling the addressee and the reader out of their worries about insignificant matters such as "street soldier[s] not gettin taxis" (Hammad, *Born* 26). The speaker juxtaposes such trivial matters with the harsh reality of the conditions in Palestine. She begins with a harrowing metaphor, recounting how "in [her] father's city / there's a baby girl" who "was eaten out by a fat zionist rat" (Hammad,

Born 26). Hammad's choice to open her poem with this graphic image is a deliberate attempt to shock the reader, thus engaging him in the act of witnessing. It is notable that she describes Gaza as her father's city, implying that her father is the one who relayed these traumatic memories to her. She describes the terrible conditions in which Palestinians are forced to live in Gaza: "140 miles of 850,000 souls gaza / stripped of humanity / the most people in the tiniest place anywhere" (Hammad, *Born* 26). The visual image paints Gaza as a city that is swarming with thousands of people, supplanting its description as an "open-air prison"[2] and shedding light on the dehumanization of its citizens by the Israeli army. Hammad continues depicting the daunting conditions in Gaza: "tired people with no place everywhere / open sewers carry the sweat of occupation into / the swollen bellies of babies" (Hammad, *Born* 26). The metaphor, comparing the Israeli occupation to poisonous sewer water, suggests that every Palestinian is born with a transmitted legacy of pain and suffering. Indeed, "just as war was the ground of being, so pain was the ground of personhood. The presence of suffering was powerful enough so that it had to be absorbed" (Hoffman 13). Just like the legacy of suffering was passed down to Hammad in "the necklace," it is passed down to every Palestinian child born in occupied Palestine.

One cannot help but notice how Hammad's description of Gaza almost mirrors its current conditions in 2024. The Oxford Committee for Famine Relief has interviewed one of its staff in Gaza who said that they feel "like rats in a cage. Gaza City is closed off, and we hear that people traveling to find shelter in the south were targeted in an airstrike and killed . . . Shifa, is a nightmarish hell hole, with sewage overflowing" (Oxfam). The similarity of the descriptions despite the passing years highlights that the Nakba is indeed continuous. Hammad further describes Gaza as a city of "closed universities and open prisons" (Hammad, *Born* 27). The mention of closed universities is quite significant as Israel has a long history of *scholasticide* which is "a term first coined by Oxford professor Karma Nabulsi during the 2008-2009 Israeli assault on Gaza" to refer to the intentional "destruction of education systems and buildings" as well as institutions of "cultural heritage: archives, libraries and museums" (Desai). The latest example of Israel's scholasticide happened during the 2023 Israeli invasion of Gaza as "all or parts of Gaza's 12 universities have been bombed and mostly destroyed" (Desai). Israel's intentional scholasticide poses a great risk to Palestinian history, culture, and future. This is also precisely why postmemorial works are highly significant since they counter Israel's attempt to erase or alter history.

In a series of haunting images, Hammad details the horrific ways of torture that Palestinian children endure such as having their fingers cut or having cigarettes put out in different parts of their body. She describes Gaza as "hell / on earth" where "little boys get arrested for thinkin / rocks at armed mercenaries" (Hammad, *Born* 26) and young women get "rape[d] . . . with . . . machine gun[s] down [their] throat[s]" (Hammad, *Born* 27). She asks the addressee whether such graphic depictions "turn[ed] [his] stomach?" and placates him by telling him that at "least [she] didn't turn [his] insides to confetti / with a u.s. made machete" (Hammad, *Born* 27). Such gruesome images are meant to rouse the reader from his/her complacency, thus spurring them to engage in the strategies of ethical witnessing. Indeed, the postgeneration has "the responsibility not only to bear witness but to battle the resistance to knowing" (Hoffman 162). By describing such horrific incidences, Hammad bears witness to them in her poem, thus

making her poem a postmemorial work that is embedded with the historical trauma of her people. Hammad closes her poem by asking for the support of her fellow people of colour in the US: "so when you call me sista / ask after our family" (Hammad, *Born* 28). This is significant because "the act of asking – of crying out – is a moment of political resistance that calls for a great deal of psychological strength" (Frosh 41). Speaking out about traumatic memories is in itself a nonviolent means of resistance and an attempt to preserve the record of history. Hammad's "taxi" is thus a postmemorial work that brings the collective trauma of Palestinians to the forefront of the reader's mind.

In "our mothers and their lives of suffer," Hammad sheds light on the resilience of Palestinian women in the face of trauma. In consecutive lines, the speaker moves from one trauma to another, shocking the reader with how much suffering Palestinian women endure. She addresses the women directly in her poem, marvelling at their perseverance in the face of tremendous loss:

> when your land is raped you
>
> thank god you still have husbands
>
> when your husbands are jailed
>
> you thank god for your sons
>
> when your sons are murdered execution style
>
> you hide your daughters and
>
> when they are found and jailed
>
> you fast til they return. (Hammad, *Born* 66).

The enjambed lines denote a sense of continuity, highlighting the continuous nature of trauma in the lives of Palestinian women. No sooner do they manage to overcome one calamity than they are faced with a more devastating one. Yet, the women still pray, still fast, still hold on to their unwavering faith. It is a quiet resilience, a silent perseverance that is "mistake[n] . . . / for acquiescence" by their daughters (Hammad, *Born* 66). Such resilience is common among trauma survivors. Indeed, the postgeneration "often find[s] the parents . . . maddeningly resilient" (Hoffman 182). It can be argued that Hammad employs the strategy of recognition in her poem as she acknowledges all the horrific traumas that Palestinian mothers are subjected to, highlighting how their endurance is the opposite of acquiescence. Such endurance is currently prevalent in Gaza in the face of the atrocities committed by Israel. Currently, "[a]s many as a million women and girls are estimated to have been displaced . . . Yet amid these unimaginable burdens, the women of Gaza are somehow rising to meet challenges that only seem to get heavier by the day: lack of sanitation, single parenthood, hunger, disease. Even pregnancy has become a life-threatening struggle" (Abdulfattah). It is thus clear that Palestinian women exhibit remarkable tenacity amidst the havoc wrought by the Nakba.

It is notable that the speaker of the poem does not make the mistake of identifying with her mother, thus risking being enveloped by the trauma of the past. Instead, she examines the trauma at a distance, focusing on the "smoldering strength" (Hammad, *Born* 66) of her mother. She admits that she resorts to this "maternal love to throw as / stones at mercenaries" and pictures her mother's "patience as shields in the nights" (Hammad, *Born* 66). The two similes compare the love and patience of Palestinian women to weapons and shields, highlighting their unequivocal strength in the face of insurmountable tragedies. Though the mothers do not directly speak out against the atrocities committed against them, they "converse daily with ancestors" (Hammad, *Born* 67). The dialogue with ancestors

suggests an ongoing process of a transgenerational transmission of trauma and legacy at once. The mothers thus relay the received ancestral memories to their daughters who later transmit them to an even wider audience through postmemorial works. Through "casting daughters as agents of transmission, and through them opening the space of remembrance beyond the line of family, their practice of postmemory, particularly, can become a reparative ethical and political act of solidarity and, perhaps, agency on behalf of the trauma of the other" (Hirsch, *Generation* 99). Hammad's poem is one of these postmemorial works that attempt to "honor [Palestinian] mothers / and the lives / they survived" (Hammad, *Born* 67). By enabling the daughter to speak for the mother, the poem can be regarded as "an act of resistance and commemoration, in which the trauma is fully attested to and known" (Frosh 41). In a sense, the poem embodies all of Frosh's strategies of witnessing: recognition, listening, and speaking out. It is a postmemorial work that not only acknowledges the trauma of the parents but also attests to their perseverance.

Hammad's "jabaliya" is yet another poem that is woven out of a patchwork of traumatic memories. The poem opens with the image of a woman, carrying a light and calling for help: "a woman wears a bell carries a light calls searches / through madness of deir yessin calls for rafah for bread" (Hammad, *Born* 89). The allusion to Deir Yassin's massacre situates the woman within the Nakba and its horrific aftermath. The mention of Rafah alludes to the Rafah Border Crossing, suggesting that the woman's pleas for help and food are directed towards neighbouring countries. The woman continues her tread across the ravaged land of Palestine where she "gathers / children in zeitoun sitting with dead mothers" and "buries sun onto trauma" (Hammad, *Born* 89). The pun in "sun" implies that all the sons of the dead mothers will be buried into a well of trauma, as the traumatic memories of the Nakba and their mothers' demise will forever overshadow their lives. Indeed, postmemory is the process of being "shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (Hirsch, *Generation* 5). The woman continues on her devastating journey, calling for all the fallen cities: "back shatilla back ramleh back jenin back il khalil back il quds / all of it all underground in ancestral chests" (Hammad, *Born* 89). The repetition of "back" underscores the speaker's yearning to reverse time and restore the mentioned Palestinian cities to their glory before the war. Yet, reality hits in the next line, highlighting how these cities are all buried beneath the rubble and that their legacy only survives in "ancestral chests." The image of the ancestral chests preserving the memories of lost cities is a testament to how collective memory and trauma can be passed down across generations.

The woman continues trudging through the war-torn country, ringing her bell as if she were carrying out a religious rite. The bell "chimes through nablus back yaffa backs shot under / spotlight phosphorous murdered libeled public relations" (Hammad, *Born* 89). It is notable that Hammad's language becomes more and more fragmented throughout the poem. This breakdown of language is often associated with recounting traumatic events since a traumatic "experience is always excessive to the articulation of that experience and even more so to the reception of that articulation. It spills over" (Frosh 30-31). The result is a mosaic of words that mirror the experience of how trauma can shatter one's mind. The mention of phosphorous, murder, and libel in the same line as the reference to public relations is quite significant. It suggests that those who can help are ignoring the horrendous crimes against humanity that are

happening in Palestine. Indeed, trauma is often incommunicable because of the reluctance of others to witness it. Frosh notes how "focusing only on the incommunicability of the message of suffering can be a way of denying its reality . . . It can be a means of *political* denial, avoiding the responsibility to do what we can on the grounds that we cannot do everything" (32). Hammad is thus criticizing those who averted their eyes from witnessing the horrors of the Nakba in 1948. Unfortunately, such political denial concerning Israel's crimes against humanity in Gaza is still very much prevalent. Thus, Hammad's poem remains crucial to this very day as it can be regarded as an attempt to make the reader engage in the strategies of recognition and speaking out that Frosh mentioned in his book.

The poem almost transposes the reader into the temporal and spatial world of the Nakba, thus risking his over-identification with the past. On one hand, the woman serves as a guardian of memory, bearing witness to the ruin of her land. On the other hand, the bell functions as a testimonial object that carries the echoes of the Nakba within its chimes. It is "fired in jericho rings through blasted windows a woman / carries bones in bags under eyes disbelieving becoming / numb dumbed by numbers front and back gaza onto gaza" (Hammad, *Born* 89). The alliteration of the plosive /b/ in these two lines creates an abrupt and sharp sound that mimics the sound of blasts, evoking an auditory image of cacophony and dissonance. The bags under the woman's eyes are linked to the bags of bones that she carries, highlighting the physical and emotional toll of witnessing all this death and trauma. This image is almost a mirror of footage that appeared in 2023 in which "a man in Gaza is holding two plastic bags that carry the body parts of a child, presumably his" (Malik). These similar images testify to the perpetual nature of the Nakba and the cyclical pattern of trauma; it is a vicious circle that keeps on repeating throughout the ages. The concluding lines of the poem reinforce the need to take action before all is lost: "for gaza am sorry gaza am sorry she sings for the whole / powerless world her notes pitch perfect the bell a death toll" (Hammad, *Born* 89). The repetition of Hammad's allusion to Gaza highlights Gaza's desperate need for aid. The poem closes with the woman's melodic song shifting into the tolling of the death bell, signifying the ongoing violence despite the woman's appeal for peace. It appears that death silences the woman's cry for help, drowning the entire nation in despair. Hammad's "jabaliya" is thus a postmemorial poem that forces the reader to examine what could be done to amend the wrongs of the past.

Hammad closes her volume with "zeitoun" which refers to a district in the southern part of Gaza. The speaker of the poem wonders about the fate of Palestine: "where from here / a ribbon of land smoking / within the girl's hair smoking" (Hammad, *Born* 92). The repetition of "smoking" in relation to the land and the girl showcases how Palestinians are intrinsically linked to their homeland. Whatever destruction affects the land affects them too as evidenced by the smoke in the girl's hair. The speaker further describes the devastation around her: "there are bodies here / micro mosaic children / a triptych exile against wall" (Hammad, *Born* 92). The metaphors, comparing the children to broken fragments of mosaics and triptychs, suggest that the children have either been blown to pieces or that their psyches have been fragmented by the horror that they witnessed. Indeed, "in the aftermath of [historical trauma], the traces left on the survivors' psyches were not so much thoughts or images as scars and wounds" (Hoffman 34). The alliteration of the soft /m/ sound further hints at the fragility of these

children after the trauma. Unfortunately, children continue to suffer the most during the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The UNICEF has reported that "[c]hildren are dying at an alarming rate – more than 13,000 are reported to have been killed in this current conflict and thousands more have been injured . . . They do not have enough access to water, food, fuel and medicine. Their homes have been destroyed; their families torn apart." Children thus bear the brunt of trauma during the ongoing war as they are forced to endure circumstances that no child should ever deal with.

The poem then refers to "a closing of crossings" (Hammad, *Born* 92), denoting a sense of total entrapment. What is heartbreaking is that this image still applies to those trapped in Gaza today, as they are trapped within Gaza with no means of evacuating. The Human Rights Watch has reported that "2.3 million Palestinians are trapped in Gaza . . . [and that] there is no place within that small, densely populated territory that even purports to be safe" (Frelick). The speaker yet again wonders "where from here," a question that once more pertains to the current situation in Palestine. It is notable that the poem includes three sentences only, as the rest of it is made of fragmentary phrases that remain ambiguous, defying explanation. It thus mirrors the fragmentation of the psyche of traumatized Palestinians, allowing the reader to grasp the chaos that ensues from enduring such trauma. The poem ends with a poignant image: "I am all tunnel" (Hammad, *Born* 92), denoting a sense of despair as the speaker is engulfed by total darkness. It seems that the whole world is closing in on those who live in Gaza without any hope of escape or help. This brings forth the question of ethical responsibility. Indeed, Hoffman notes that "great . . . wrongs cannot be left unaddressed; that unless some acknowledgement and recognition of what happened takes place, the suppressed past will rankle and return" (267). The Nakba's continuous nature attests to that, so perhaps it is time to engage in Frosh's ethics of witnessing in an attempt to right the wrongs of the past.

Conclusion

Postmemory is a complex term that derives its meaning from trauma studies, memory studies, and ethical studies. It enables those who have not witnessed trauma to engage with the trauma of others through an imaginative quality. Postmemorial works often attempt to thrust the reader into the trauma of the past, making him/her an indirect witness to it and thus engaging them in the strategies of ethical witnessing. By tracing the development of the concept of postmemory in different theories, the paper argues that certain features characterize postmemorial works such as the integration of familial stories of trauma, the inclusion of testimonial objects, the use of fragmentary language, and the reference to the strategies of ethical witnessing. Through conducting a careful analysis, the paper posits that Hammad's *Born Palestinian, Born Black & the Gaza Suite* (2010) exhibits numerous characteristics of postmemory. Hammad's volume "springs from hurt, from a sense of despair, and from an incorrigible will toward improvement" (Villalobos 16). Hammad weaves a tapestry of familial stories, testimonial objects, and horrific memories in an attempt to awaken the reader to the horrors of the Nakba and its continuous nature. Using a highly fragmented language that mimics the shattered psyche of the survivors of the Nakba, she plunges the reader into a world of chaos and war. Her poems are, in essence, a process of avowal in which she engages the reader in the ethical act of recognizing the trauma of the survivors of the Nakba. The paper relates Hammad's poems to the ongoing Israeli invasion of Gaza. As shown, the Nakba was the beginning of a vicious

cycle of trauma that is still happening at this very instant. Palestinians continue to face displacement, massacres, torture, scholasticide, and ethnic cleansing. Hammad's poems thus remain quite relevant in light of recent events, as they aim to preserve the traumatic memories of the past in an attempt to stop the cycle of trauma.

Notes

[1] For more information about each massacre, check Samar Al-Gamal's article "A History Stained with Innocent Blood: A Chronicle of Israel's Massacres in Palestine" (2023) in *Ahram Online*: english.ahram.org.eg/News/510520.aspx.

[2] Gaza has been described as an "open-air prison" by the Humans Right Watch: www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/14/gaza-israels-open-air-prison-15.

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