
**Snatched Motherhood: Trauma of Mothers on Losing their Children in
Christy Lefteri's "The Beekeeper of Aleppo"**

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Abstract

Motherhood means love, joy, familial bonding, and contentment. A woman takes pride in being a mother since she is the world of her children. She becomes the protective entity for them throughout her life. When this motherhood is snatched away by the killing of the children in war, she becomes a tormented person her whole life. The loss of her child is the most agonizing forfeiture of a woman. War-oriented zones shatter the existence of the common man, and the worst sufferers are the women due to this. Christy Lefteri epitomizes this sense of incompleteness of motherhood in "The Beekeeper of Aleppo". This paper delves into the lives of Afra, Dahab, Angeliki and a few minor mother characters in the novel, who have lost their children in the Syrian war and how they are traumatized in unimaginable ways in addition to being affected. It examines how the Syrian war has disrupted their lives both physically and psychologically and has wreaked havoc by causing emptiness in these women's lives.

Keywords: Syrian war, Blindness, Separation distress, Traumatic distress.

Introduction

Syrian war has been an ongoing conflict for more than a decade now. It has caused innumerable damage to both the body and psyche of common people. This unending conflict has influenced many writers to bring to light the atrocities of war through the medium of literature. Contemporary writers like Khalid Hosseini, Joby Warrick, Rania Abouzeid, Atia Abawi, and N.H Senzai have given various shades of the Syrian conflict to the best picture in the novels.

Trauma is "generally understood as a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organization and perception of the external world". (Balaev 17). *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* showcases various characters who battle for survival amidst the war

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scenarios. It is an agonizing tale of Syrian refugees who become the subjects of repression, dehumanization, and endless oppression. Among all the wounds, the greatest trauma that forms the novel's core is a mother's loss of a child. It seems to have damaged their psyche forever and has left an indelible wound because of an unbearable trauma.

"A child's death defeats and expunges naturalistic hope." (Kuylen 544). This is true in the case of Afra, the central character in the novel. She witnesses the death of her beloved son Sami in a bomb blast right in front of her eyes. The trauma of the incident has made her go physically blind for lifetime. Though she has become blind, she is unworried about that, as the only pain was that of losing her son. She withdraws herself from the outside world and becomes ready to die anytime, as she feels that part of her life, Sami, has already gone. Her life has become less dear to her. When Nuri, her husband, has been persuading her to move away from Syria, she is unwilling to leave the land. Her mind seems to have not accepted her son's death yet. She longs for the presence of her son. Afra was once a lively woman and a talented artist who has now turned expressionless and pale. "She had nothing to smile about....if by some miracle she smiled, it would have felt like finding water in the desert." (Lefteri 10).

Afra lives with intense grief that is accompanied by separation, distress and trauma. She confirms the traits of "traumatic distress", as Grace H. Christ et al. write in their article. The symptoms consist of having a:

"Purposelessness about the future; numbness, detachment, or absence of emotional responsiveness; difficulty believing or acknowledging the death; feeling that life is empty or meaningless; feeling that part of oneself has died; shattered world view; assuming symptoms of harmful behaviors of the deceased person; excessive irritability, bitterness, or anger related to death." (Christ et al 120)

This way, Afra has secluded herself from the outer world and lingers with Sami's memories. She sits on the camp bed where Sami sleeps, lost in thoughts with "no expression at all."(Lefteri 39). She considers her son Sami living by cooking for him. Nuri says:

I saw that she'd made bread again. 'You made khubz?' I said.

'I made it for Sami', she said. 'Not for you....'

'Afra....'

'I'm not an idiot, you know. I haven't lost my mind. I just wanted to make him some bread.

Is that ok with you?" (Lefteri 39)

Afra, in a way, stays unwilling to accept the reality of her child's death. She wants to continue with the mother-child bonding for a lifetime. Though her nurturing aspect is snatched away through her child's murder, she still wants to continue with it. On witnessing her son's death, she undergoes an intense shock that has made her blind. This blindness is a result of the coping mechanism of her body, which had to shut down due to her witnessing such a severe trauma.

Another mother who undergoes depression after losing her child is Dahab, Mustafa's wife. She is a mother of twelve-year-old son Firaz and his elder sister Aya. The initial pages of the novel give a picture of Dahab's happy motherhood days, where she cooks together with

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Mustafa and dine with Nuri's family with limitless excitement. Her laughter is especially like "a booming laugh sending the birds up past the buildings and into the night sky." (Lefteri 16). She becomes an altogether contrast to this after the devastation of losing Firas in war. Mustafa describes Dahab's agony in one of his emails to Nuri:

Dahab is very unhappy, Nuri. She was trying to stay strong for Aya, but since I arrived here, she has been lying down all day with the lights switched off, holding on to a photograph of Firas. Sometimes, she cries, but most of the time, she is silent. She will not talk about him. (Lefteri 169)

Angeliki, a Somalian refugee, is another mother character who is a victim of snatched motherhood. They have abducted her girl baby in the refugee camps within a few months of her delivery. People would trade their organs for them and also use them as sexual objects. Angeliki is aware of this, and she has become immune to the traumas she underwent. She is seen as a sleepwalking woman who wanders the whole night. She also became insomniac as a result of depression and anxiety concerning the loss of her child. Angeliki was a careful nurturer of her baby and now is in constant pain due to the loss. She cherishes her baby's small lock of hair as her keepsake and an only emotional attachment to her child. Due to trauma, she tries to cope with the stress by diverting herself into self-grooming. She uses talcum powder every night, which only gives her a pallid complexion. She is often roaming with "breasts leaking, fresh wet white patches on her white top." (Lefteri 222).

The 'leaking breasts' are a significant symbol in the novel. It is a representation of an intimate connection between a mother and a child. In his article, Bottoroff says that the act of breastfeeding is considered 'gift giving' by many mothers in a survey. Through this closeness, a mother and her baby 'become one'. (206). Angeliki is thus seen to have lost this closeness, and her leaking breasts denote her longing to unite with her child through the act of breastfeeding. "A crying infant primes its mother's brain to ready her body for nursing." (Hannah Devlin). The engorgement and the leaking of a mother's breast are connected to the setting off the oxytocin release from the brain. Thus, Angeliki is seen to undergo the leaks whenever she hears any baby cries from afar, thinking that the baby is hers. This disconnection with breastfeeding denotes the disconnected motherhood itself.

These mothers are said to have undergone complicated grief that is accompanied by separation distress and trauma. The "separation distress" symptoms include the constant thought about the deceased child, yearning for the lost child, and excessive loneliness since the death, as well as extreme levels of "traumatic distress" symptoms that comprise "purposelessness about the future; numbness, detachment, or absence of emotional responsiveness; difficulty believing or acknowledging the death; shattered world view" (Christ Grace). Dahab seems to be in separation distress when she is described as holding a photograph of her son Firaz and mourning quietly all day. On the other side, Afra seems to be in traumatic distress.

A minor character in the novel, a mother with a blue hijab, tries to breastfeed her baby, but she can't as she is not lactating enough due to intense anxiety and stress due to the ongoing

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war. "The negative effect of psychosocial stressors and high-stress reactivity was observed in various stages of the reproductive process in women, including lactation." Therefore, Psychosocial stress is a form of stress experienced due to changes in social situations. In the case of *The Beekeeper of Aleppo*, it is the war stress that has made this mother undergo enormous mental strains and snatched her motherhood by making her an inefficient mother. She becomes unable to nourish her child with food. She has lost that infinite connection with her baby through the loss of nurturing, which is the basis of motherhood. She becomes angry and frustrated and begins to cry, wiping her tears away, which is the only affordable thing she can do.

Conclusion

"Any woman who'd ever lost a child knew of the hollowness that remained within the soul" (Brittany C Cherry). The novel brings to light the unacknowledged and unrecognized plight of mothers who have undergone tragedies in their lives due to war. The Syrian war's merciless oppression of refugees and the killing of their children has made mothers mentally unstable. Lefteri has portrayed the agony of many refugee mothers through Afra and other mother characters with dexterity. Though these mothers have undergone depression, they are always resilient and are seen to be always moving forward with hope. Afra finally decides to move from Syria with her husband Nuri and often engages in painting again. Angeliki tries to divert her shattered mind by constantly seeking employment in the refugee camps. Dahab, too, apart from being depressed at times, try to be happy for her husband and daughter, Aya. Their grief may be strong and never-ending, but they always seem to remember that human resilience is more powerful. Though their world has crumbled down due to the loss of motherhood, these mothers are clinging onto some, restarting themselves, and continuing to flow in the river of life.

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