

# HEALING THE WOUNDS OF WAR WITH NATURE'S NURTURE: A STUDY OF ZOLFAH KATOUH'S *AS LONG AS THE LEMON TREES GROW*

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## Abstract:

War causes a lot of destruction. The world perceives only the destruction visible to the eyes, the physical destruction. But mental destruction can penetrate deep into the roots of a person and can endanger one's own life. The imprints of the mental destruction are often ignored, or time is considered to be the cure for it. *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* is a novel by Zolfah Katouh that delves into the trauma faced by Salama Kassab, the protagonist. According to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, her past episodes return through hallucinations, intrusive memories, fear and survivor's guilt. This study also includes ecopsychology to show that nature plays an intricate role in healing past traumatic experiences. Lemon tree, garden, nature, sea and Syria's landscape act as symbols of hope and mental revival during times of devastation. The paper tries to prove that while trauma due to past incidents could be recurring, nature and environment provide healing to the wound. It provides a path to resilience, self-recovery, and emotional restoration. In this interdisciplinary study combining trauma studies and ecopsychology, the author is trying to reveal the therapeutic potential of the environment to confront and heal from past traumatic experiences.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Environment, Ecopsychology, Nature, Healing

Literature has always acted as the voice piece of unsung emotions. Trauma is one such emotion that is not only difficult to withstand but can sometimes be very challenging in identifying itself. Trauma is mainly caused by past experiences. Cathy Caruth, in her groundbreaking work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History* (1996), defines trauma as "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon". Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* proves this definition by Caruth. Set against the Syrian Civil War, the novel narrates the story of Salama Kassab, an eighteen-year-old pharmacy student whose life was shattered after the war. After losing her family to the war, Salama volunteers to work at the hospital treating people wounded because of the war. She faces panic attacks and hallucinations during those times, and she relies upon nature for her comfort.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is not fully understood at the time of happening; it hits repeatedly through intrusive memories, nightmares and other psychological symptoms. Trauma disrupts the individual's ability to process reality and always maintain a connection between the present and the past. While Caruth's trauma theory talks about suffering, ecopsychology highlights the healing power of nature. Ecopsychologists argue that nature can promote emotional well-being by reducing psychological distress and restoring a sense of balance.

Salama's trauma originates from different branches. The death of her parents and her mother tops the list. She also encounters death in her day-to-day life working at the hospital. She witnesses injured civilians, dying children and the destruction of her homeland. In the beginning of the novel, it is noticed that Salama goes to buy her groceries and is scared to step onto the road because of her past trauma. During that time, she thinks of nature. "I murmur, "Daisies. Daisies. Daisies. Sweet-smelling daisies."" (Katouh 13). The thought of daisies gives her the comfort and confidence to step out and reach her home.

Trauma also leads to hallucinations. One of the intriguing manifestations of Salama's trauma is the appearance of Khwaf, meaning fear in Arabic. Khwaf is a hallucinatory figure who always accompanies her everywhere. He kindles the past experiences in her and projects them to her as a movie. He reminds her of the failed promise that she had given to her father and also reminds her about her word given to her brother, that is, protecting Layla, her pregnant sister-in-law.

Another symptom of trauma is survivor's guilt. Salama constantly questions her sole existence while others in her family have died. She feels responsible for the death of her mother and her sister-in-law and thinks that leaving Syria would be a betrayal of those who continue to struggle. This traps her in a cycle and hence limits her from seeking help from Am, the man who is transporting people to Germany in exchange for money. Moreover, Salama also experiences fear and anxiety. Every explosion, gunshot, or memory threatens to reactivate her trauma. The constant presence of violence prevents her from achieving emotional stability. Thus, the novel presents trauma not as a single event but as an ongoing psychological condition that shapes every aspect of Salama's life.

Ecopsychology questions the notion that mental health and the environment are not dependent on each other. It suggests that nature possesses therapeutic qualities that aid in reducing stress, anxiety, depression and trauma. The principles of ecopsychology are particularly relevant to Salama's experiences. Throughout the novel, moments of contact with nature provide emotional relief from the overwhelming realities of war. Memories of lemon trees and natural landscapes offer psychological refuge, enabling her to maintain hope despite persistent suffering.

One such incident was when Khwaf reminded Salama about her mother's death. Khwaf took her through the scenario at the time of her mother's death when she failed to talk to Am about the illegal transportation to Germany. During that time, Salama sought solace in nature: " "Jasmine. Jasmine. Jasmine..." I murmur over and over until I swear I can smell them like I used to when Mama took me in her arms." (Katouh 34)

Even when Salama proceeds to talk with Am in the main hall due to Khwaf's persistence, trauma engulfs her. She again goes to nature for comfort: " "Daylilies," I whisper as I walk to the main hall, training my eyes on the muddied floors." (Katouh 40)

Salama falls in love with Kenan, her patient's brother. When they were together, the army began to attack. Kenan takes Salama to his ancestral house for safety. Even during that moment, Kenan was optimistic and sought aid from nature to console her.

" "There's still beauty, Salama. Still life and strength in Homs." He nods toward the sun. "There's color..." A few stars twinkle through the wisps of cloud. Decorating them like sapphires, precious gifts for those who would gaze upward. Eight levels above the ground brings a unique kind of peace." (Katouh 182 183)

Nature also helps Salama prepare herself before starting her day at the hospital. The images of flowers and trees calm her nerves and help in treating the devastatingly wounded patients. "I stay in the stockroom a bit longer until I can see those white hawthorn petals behind my closed eyelids. Then I walk outside to face whatever fresh hell barges through the doors." (Katouh 174).

The novel repeatedly presents nature as a force that survives even when human structures collapse. Lemon trees continue to grow despite violence, displacement, and destruction. Their endurance mirrors the resilience of the Syrian people. Salama declares: "This is my land, and just like the lemon trees that have been growing here for centuries, spilled blood won't stop us." (Katouh 220). Nature therefore becomes a model of resilience. The continued existence of lemon trees reassures Salama that life persists despite suffering and loss.

Ecopsychology emphasises that nature often inspires hope because it embodies cycles of growth, renewal, and regeneration. This principle is evident in the novel's recurring references to planting, growth and future harvests.

Lemon tree plays an inevitable role in providing the comfort and sense of belonging for both Salama and Kenan. It embodies home and the state of normalcy. Most of the houses in Syria had a lemon tree, and thus it represents a peaceful Syria. Salama is brought in by the memories of family and childhood, which provide peace to her. It connects her to her past identity and helps in upholding her sense of self without losing it. Her toil at the hospital and witnessing the death of numerous patients would trigger turmoil in her. During such times, the image of the lemon tree functions as a safe space when Salama can momentarily escape from the tremors of war. The tree persists as a silent companion by offering stability and helping her live in the unpredictable space.

The poem associated with the lemon tree states: "Every lemon will bring forth a child, and the lemons will never die out." (Katouh 353). Similarly, Salama imagines a future in which Syrians will return home, rebuild their cities and plant new lemon trees. This vision transforms nature into a symbol of national and personal recovery. The act of planting represents not merely environmental restoration but psychological renewal as well.

Towards the end of the novel, Salama and Kenan, along with his siblings, migrate to Germany with the help of Am. Even after their translocation, they seek comfort in a lemon tree. They plant a lemon tree on their balcony as a fond reminder of their motherland in search of comfort. Kenan even grows impatient as he does not see any fruit beginning to bear from the tree.

"He glances at the balcony. "We've had her for two months now and we've barely seen more than a green blade." I laugh. "Lemons take time, Kenan. We're growing a tree. They need patience, just like change does." (Katouh 354)

Through these lines, it is evident that Salama has sought comfort through the new lemon tree that they have planted in their home. Just as the lemon tree is beginning to have its fruit with time, Salama also wants Kenan to be patient towards a hopeful change in their new location. Salama is seeing the lemon tree as a symbol of hope and comfort that will help in fighting her trauma. Each leaf and fruit in the tree gives her the optimism and fuel to move forward with her life. Salama ends the story by saying, "It reminds me that as long as the lemon trees grow, hope will never die." (Katouh 355)

## Conclusion:

Zoulfa Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* offers a profound exploration of trauma, survival and hope in the context of the Syrian Civil War. Through the character of Salama Kassab, the novel illustrates the devastating psychological effects of war, including hallucinations, survivor's guilt, fear and emotional fragmentation as seen in Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory. Ecopsychology sheds a ray of hope for the characters to swim through the experience of trauma. Nature functions as a source of comfort, identity, hope and emotional restoration. The lemon tree symbolises endurance and renewal, reminding the characters that life continues even after devastating loss. While trauma leaves lasting scars, the natural world offers pathways toward healing. This study suggests that healing does not occur solely through forgetting traumatic

experiences. Instead, recovery emerges through reconnecting with the natural world, preserving bonds with place and embracing nature's capacity for growth and renewal.

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