



Testimonies of Silence: Trauma, Unspeakability and Linguistic Fragmentation in Suad Aldarra's *I Don't Want to Talk about Home* (2022)

شهادات الصمت: الصدمة، اللاقولية، والتفكك اللغوي في مذكرات سعاد الدرة "لا أريدُ الحديثُ عَنِ الوطن 2022-"

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Article abstract:

Suad Aldarra's debut memoir *I Don't Want to Talk about Home* (2022) explores trauma, unspeakability, and linguistic fragmentation in refugee literature. Because trauma studies have revealed a deficiency regarding the linguistic and narrative limitations of refugees' testimony, this article will not only demonstrate how silence functions as a self-contained language, powerful and politically charged, but it will also reveal how unspeakability and linguistic fragmentation become imperative to bear witness to Syria's history of trauma and resistance. Ultimately, Aldarra urges readers to hear the hum of words by paying careful attention to what remains unsaid.

Keywords: Trauma; Unspeakability; Linguistic Fragmentation; Suad Aldarra.

ملخص المقال :

تستكشف مذكرات سعاد الدرة "لا أريدُ التحدث عن الوطن" (2022) الصدمة، واللاقولية (أو المسكوت عنه)، والتفكك اللغوي في أدب اللاجئين. فقد كشفت الدراسات السابقة عن عجزها الكبير في تحليل ودراسة القيود اللغوية والسردية لشهادة اللاجئين، وعليه فإن هذا المقال سيوضح كيف يعمل الصمت كلغة قائمة بذاتها - قوية ومشحونة سياسيًا - من جهة، وسيكشف كيف أن المسكوت عنه والتفكك اللغوي أصبحا عاملان أساسيان للتعبير عن تاريخ ومقاومة اللاجئين السوريين من صدمات التهجير القسري بعد أحداث الربيع العربي من جهة أخرى. وفي الأخير، تحث الدرة قراءها إلى الإستماع والانتباه إلى هممة الكلمات لفهم مدى قساوة ما سكت عنه عمدًا ولم يُذكر. الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، اللاقولية، التفكك اللغوي، سعاد الدرة



Introduction :The Arab Awakening

The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry."
Virginia Woolf, "On Being Ill"

During the Arab Spring 2011, people, prince and pauper were united by the same slogan: "People want the fall of the regime²". This dictum signalled the Arab people's simple aspirations for social and political justices, dignity, and freedom. The surprisingly dazzling success of the Arab revolt in Tunisia and Egypt, which resulted in the toppling of their dictator-presidents (namely Benali and Mubarek) brought hope to other Arab countries to aspire for a better life. Drawing on the Tunisian and Egyptian prowess, the Arab people gained more awareness about the importance of solidarity and collective strength in achieving shared objectives. Actually, a wave of change was unleashed to mark a transition to a potentially wonderful future.

In March 2011, the Syrian uprising started peacefully, but it soon deviated from its trajectory to espouse a violent and brutal crackdown on protesters which inevitably led to ignite public indignation and ire. Bashar Al Assad's regime responded with a series of imprisonments and executions. Even children, who were apolitical, were not spared: they were brutalized and mutilated simply because they were excited to participate in the protest or because they drew some graffities in favour of the Arab Spring. Soon, Syria slid into war between pro and anti-Al Assad. The situation was aggravated by the interference of some terrorist organizations that took part in the conflict. Now, because of the multiple military actions against Al Assad's forces launched by the USA, France and UK, on the one hand, and those perpetrated by Al Assad's main ally, Russia, on the other, Syria became a war zone by excellence. The Syrian civil war has not only generated insecurity and alarm among the Syrians, but it also marked the outburst of one of the most devastating crises of the 21st century: the UNHCR reported that by February 2018, more than 5.5 million refugees fled to Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan and more than 6.5 million IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) left their homes and sought refuge within the confines of Syria. They escaped the atrocities of the war seeking a better and more secure environment.

Actually, with this mass displacement, a vast corpus of testimonial literature which called for a critical understanding of trauma and forced displacement emerged. It also asked for a deeper examination of how Syrian refugee literature defies the Western theories that extensively theorized silence and unspeakability through the testimonies of European contexts, and mainly those related to the Holocaust. Suad Aldarra's *I Don't Want to Talk about Home* concerns itself with the harrowing experiences of a Syrian displaced: Suad Aldarra herself. Actually, this book is a memoir based on the author's life and experiences which recall the psychological consequences of forced exile. It constitutes a compelling and dense account particularly when examining themes of trauma, 'unspeakability' and the limits of language in the context of Arab diasporic literature. Aldarra's testimonial memoir, as it were, focusses on memory and how it fades and becomes fractured. It also explores the unspeakable nature of trauma through the author's silence and how the refugee's identity is incessantly fractured and (re)shaped. Said differently, the memoir is paradoxically distinctive not for what it expresses about the traumatic experiences of displaced Syrians, but rather for what it does not. The title itself is paradoxical: it refers to a silence yet is loaded with speech; it presupposes a refusal to narrate but ending with a 305-page narrative; it expresses an unspeakability that speaks. Aldarra's memoir occupies a

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distinctive position for it succeeded to create a tension between what is sayable and what is not; between testimony and linguistic (mis)representation. The memoir, then, becomes a textual site where language simultaneously enables and restricts the reporting of traumatic experiences related to displacement.

1. Forced Displacement: Traumatic Experience, Fragmented Memory

The memoir consists of a prologue, 21 chapters numbered from 0 to 20, and an epilogue. It opens with an evocative significant declarative sentence: “we all come from somewhere”. In the context of forced displacement, this sentence stands as a poignant reminder of the cruel uprootedness and loss of affiliation: the fact of being cut off from one’s geographical and physical origins out of necessity and coercion. For refugees, the “somewhere” still exists, though it has turned into an insecure, traumatic site. Paradoxically, this “somewhere” which rejected and endangered them is still deeply loved to the extent that in host countries, these people try to defy erasure by asserting that “they come from somewhere”. This assertion becomes an act of resistance: it is a way of declaring their belonging to *a somewhere*, insisting on the validity of their history, culture and language in this host “somewhere” (or rather nowhere). Syria is the home of all memories, experiences and life. The fact of being physically absent from it does not, in any case, diminish the love and sense of attachment the writer, and all Syrians, have to the only place that really counts for them. Within the context of the civil war, Syrians become aware that “their” Syria is lost: “And every time I say I am from Syria, I feel like I’m standing at a funeral while Syria lies in an open casket and mourners tell me how sorry they are for my loss” (1). What next? A series of inflictions: insecurity, forced displacement, loss of belonging and identity crisis. This “sudden uncontrollable disruption of affiliative bonds” (Lindemann, qtd in de Zulueta 335) has been observed to have a tangible alterative impact not only on the sense and structure of home, but also on the psychological foundations of a person’s identity. Refugees, as it were, find themselves stuck in a strange in-between place where memories become a source of pain and distress, and belonging becomes elusive.

Originally derived from Greek, the term *trauma* designates a “wound” or “a physical injury” inflicted on the body. Subsequently, with the important advancements mainly in medicine and psychological studies, the term came to encompass the meaning of a psychological wound as well (i.e., inflicted on the mind). In his seminal work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud contends that, unlike physical traumata, psychological ones are more complex and challenging events to be straightforwardly healed. This unexpected, violent ‘breach’ in one’s mind is not fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence, thus, not fully accessible to their consciousness. Consequently, traumatized individuals are repeatedly haunted by the injuries of the past which manifest in the form of repetitive actions or nightmares (23-5). In the same vein, for Cathy Caruth, trauma corresponds to one’s reaction or “response to unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena” (*Unchained Experience* 91). In fact, trauma is not about the stressful event *per se* as much as it is about the emotional and psychological response to that event.

For those people who became refugees, forced displacement is a trauma. For what is forced displacement if not the severance of ties to one’s self, family, land and culture which come back as repetitive prompts reminding the displaced that what is lost is irrevocable, yet inevitable. Forced exile, as a matter of fact, engenders a profound interruption in the relational dynamics that are supposed to strengthen the individual’s emotional and psychological stability. As aforementioned, trauma cannot be understood at the moment of its occurrence, it rather manifests *belatedly* through the fractured patterns of kinship, culture and language. This *belatedness* reflects the mind’s struggle to assimilate an overwhelming experience. Derived from Freud’s studies on hysteria, belatedness (or afterwardsness) suggests that the traumatic experience is kept suppressed in the unconscious mind, then comes back later (belatedly) in the form of re-livings and recurring phenomena. Early trauma theorists (Freud 1920; Felman & Laub 1992; Caruth 1995, 1996; Hartman



1995) labelled this as “repetition and return trope”. Consequently, this temporal disparity or time’s rupture between the occurrence of the traumatic event and its comprehension led scholars to assert that trauma inherently resists direct linguistic rendition.

Aldarra’s unexpected, violent deportation from her cherished homeland was traumatic. The unassimilated nature of this event left her perplexed and bewildered. Her inability to grasp the events around her was palpable: “*I can’t recognize the world around me. What am I doing here? Why is everyone speaking in English rather than Arabic?*”³ Everyone becomes a stranger. I become a stranger” (2). Aldarra becomes a stranger at home. Damascus becomes insecure: missiles hitting here and there, checkpoints where soldiers are holding guns, bad electricity and gas service, bureaucratic abasement, the collapse of the currency. The latter mark the impetus behind leaving Damascus: Aldarra “need(s) to leave Syria. [she] need(s) to leave this country of unanswered prayers” (4). Relatively, these events happen quickly leaving no time for reflection. These overwhelming events are not understood when they first occurred, but come back in a form of flashbacks and remembrances of things past.

I Don’t Want to Talk about Home, the memoir’s title, already indicates a return to the past. Why doesn’t Aldarra want to speak about Syria? Is it because of the traumatic experiences she witnessed that she decides not to talk about home to avoid re-traumatization? Or is it because home exists only in her remembrances that she lost the ability to distinguish between reality and memory? In fact, this avoidance revolves around the author’s desire to regain the past, and inability to get access to it:

‘Ryan was telling me about his trip to Damascus,’ I sighed. ‘I was surprised how much he knew about the intimate little details of living there. I didn’t think anyone knew those things that I miss the most but couldn’t explain. I don’t know if ...’ I took another cold breath filled with Pablo’s tobacco. ‘I don’t know if I’ll ever go back, Pablo. I don’t know if I’ll ever live those details again.’ My tears fell anew. (Aldarra 256)

And then, how does the memory of the traumatized operate?

Generally speaking, memory is a mental process concerned with the retrieval of stored information already learnt, witnessed or experienced. It has been demonstrated that, through multiple mental and cognitive operations, memory helps and facilitates the transformation of “perceptual input into an elaborated experience” (Gerrig 299) of the world giving rise to representations which are the products of the understanding of events. Memory, as it were, presupposes a deep connection of the present to the past: the remembering of stored events and how it profoundly impacts and alters the present.

Regarding trauma studies, Antze and Lambek declare that the only memory worthy of discussion and recollection pertains to the memory of trauma (1996 xii). As a matter of fact, memory and trauma studies become closely connected: trauma altered memory from being just a process of recalling stored information whenever needed, to a more representational and imaginative process. Memory, in this case, is *reshaped* each and every time remembering occurs. Said differently, memory has a cathartic power which is denied to trauma which seriously fractures the individual’s representational capacities impacting his coherent sense of self (Silke Arnold-de Simine 140-1).

In the second part of her seminal work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth sheds light on the *paradoxical* nature of psychological overwhelming experiences on individuals, mainly on their memory. She contends, as aforementioned, that traumatic experiences are not fully grasped at the moment of their occurrence, thus, not fully integrated into consciousness which leads to repetitive mnemonic manifestations (151). The non-assimilation of traumatic events as they occur indicates that the recollections they engender are going to resist normal mental processes of comprehension. In other words, traumatic memories are distorted, unexpected and recurring, transgressing, by that, the present and disturbing the normal temporal

³ Italics in the original text.



ordering. These chronological deviations indicate the position of a given event or events in time in relation to others.

One type of these anachronies, to use Genette's term, is the flashback which "signals the retrospective evocation of an event" (Ireland 592). A flashback involves a temporal retrogradation for it consists of the fact of going back in time to re-present an earlier event in one's life: it refers to a chronological shift in the storyline. In this respect, the past incursions on the present renders the distinction between the 'now' and 'then' problematic. Trauma, as it were, concerns itself with "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (Caruth 1995 5). Since it is not fully assimilated, the traumatic event continuously endeavours to re-establish itself into the traumatized person's consciousness. In this "repetition compulsion" (using Freud's terminology), the traumatized person recalls the traumatic event via flashbacks, nightmares, and other incidences. These repetitions, as Caruth contends, represent the mind's attempts to understand the events and the various memory gaps produced by the impact of the psychological shock on an individual and a collective as well.

I Don't Want to Talk about Home displays a large number of examples dealing with the retrieval of traumatic and overwhelming events mainly through repetitive flashbacks. Aldarra provides us with those memories, issued from the painful past, which come back to the surface in a repetitive, fragmented manner. These repressed memories represent *ghostly* recurrences that are continuously haunting the author: "The darkness swallowed all the noise. I left the house before *the ghosts of the past* could follow me, and locked the main door and the backyard gate, not sure when – or if – I would be back" (*Emphasis mine* 4).

It is a fact, war and forced exile have a tremendous impact on Aldarra's memory and identity. The memoir is considered as a window wide open on the ramifications of the traumata and intricate challenges that faced Syrian displaced people. Aldarra's devastating memories about *her Syria* are marked by silence because evoking a memory charged with inner conflicts and pain is a consuming task. Said differently, the painful experiences of exile have engendered emotional and sensorial damages on refugees on both the personal and the social levels that cannot be easily transmitted, communicated and/or translated.

2. Unspeakability and the Limits of Language in Aldarra's Memoir

Aldarra's memoir is a work which enacts, rather than simply describes, the linguistic crisis ensued from the trauma of forced displacement. Actually, it delineates the limits of the refugee's verbal articulation: the limits between what can and cannot be said; between their pressing need to narrate their sufferings and the failure of any language to effectively convey them. The refusal to speak is asserted in the memoir's title: It announces that *unspeakability* is not a failure of the speaker, but rather a deliberate act of resistance against the displaced expectations to continuously express, testify, translate and explain herself. Now, because forced displacement shattered the unity that exists between the author (a person), her place and her language, Aldarra's prose is highly marked by linguistic fragmentation. The latter is illustrated in the verbal intermix between Arabic and English, and the use of untranslatable words. The analytical reading of the memoir through the lenses of trauma theory, postcolonial linguistics, and theories of exile and displacement argues that in *I Don't Want to Talk about Home* unspeakability and linguistic fragmentation are considered integral constitutive characteristics of the displaced experience, and by extension, of her narrative.

The concept of *unspeakability* has been a subject of considerable discussions within the field of trauma theory. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), Caruth contends that trauma is defined precisely by its resistance to ordinary modes of comprehension, representation and expression. She argues that the traumatic event, which occurs belatedly, comes as an intrusion, rather than a narrative, in a form of a flashback, a sensation or a silence. Language, is by definition, a means of communication which



depends on cognitive processes and temporal sequencing. However, when exposed to traumatic experiences, it becomes structurally inadequate and limited to provide a comprehensive representation. Said differently, the 'unspeakable' is not what the displaced *deliberately* chooses not to say, but what language is unable to represent.

By the same token, in her *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), Elaine Scarry argues that "pain does not simply resist language, but actively destroys it" (4). The displaced are, in this case, struggling to find linguistic equivalences to their pain. Scarry's argument consolidates the "unrepresentability" and "ineffability" of painful experiences. In her *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman claims that the major argument of psychological trauma consists in the existence of a persistent conflict between the "will to deny" and the "will to proclaim" painful events. She goes on stating that the rendering of painful experiences (atrocities, to use her word) is highly emotional, contradictory and fragmented (1). For her, unspeakability is not only a psychological phenomenon, it can also be of social and political nature. She argues that societies contribute, to a great extent, in silencing those who suffer through the creation of some conditions that prevent their stories from being told, heard or even believed. Drawing on the aforementioned theoretical foundations, Aldarra's memoir is illuminated in various ways. In fact, *I Don't Want* does not only display the narrative of war, trauma and forced exile, it rather stages the tension between the obligation to speak and the availability of adequate linguistic medium.

2.1 The Paradox of the Unspeakable Title

The central paradox at the heart of Aldarra's memoir starts with its title: *I Don't Want to Talk about Home*. The latter represents and presupposes a direct declaration of a refusal to speak about home. Yet, this refusal performs the exact act it claims to resist: speaking about home. Said differently, the title constitutes in itself a speech act for it speaks the refusal to speak about home. Aldarra's claim of silence as agency in the title immediately vanishes with the text: all the narration is about home. It deals with the depiction of Damascus streets, her grand-mother, her fluffy black-and-white cat, her native language in the streets and on the radio, coffee-shops, the smell of cooked meals, family gatherings, Ramadan nights, in short, all "the beautiful times before the war" (258). In its literal meaning, writing a memoir means speaking, communicating, expressing something, yet, Aldarra declares from the memoir's title that she won't talk about home. Paradoxically, writing becomes a way to assert her right to silence.

The structural contradiction between the text and the title it bears is not at all accidental, it is rather central and intrinsic to the author's engagement with unspeakability: it is a way to simply say that the traumatic event is "verbally unrepresentable". Torn between silence and speech; between the compulsion to bear witness and the quasi-impossibility of adequate representation, Aldarra's testimony considers both the authenticity of the traumatic event and how it is made legible and intelligible to the audience.

Actually, the author's reluctance to speak about home is discernible from the memoir's opening paragraph "every time I say I am from Syria, I feel like I am standing at a funeral while Syria lies in an open casket and mourners tell me how sorry they are for my loss". This striking metaphor clearly informs us about the author's psychological state: Aldarra equates her national identity to a mourning ritual. Instead of being a proud affirmation of her belonging to Syria, "I am from Syria" transforms a spontaneous utterance into a traumatic re-enactment, thus, a re-traumatization. The latter confirms trauma's temporal disparity as demonstrated by Caruth's notion of belatedness. Aldarra's self-identification (to Syria) forces her to recollect and re-live the painful loss, to stand silent at Syria's funerals because trauma resists direct rendition. The latter is accentuated when the author insists on the fact that "It is all the little things that can't be written down or described [...] It is the hole inside your soul that can't be filled by any other place" (2).

So, what is unspeakable in Aldarra's memoir is not only concerned with the content of her traumatic experience, but with the form of the telling too. The *home* she does not want to talk about does not only



represent the geographical location, but the author's existential condition: that of belonging, of feeling and being at ease in a place, in a culture, with a language and above all, with oneself. Aldarra declared that "the thing" she misses most is [her]self" (1). 'To Talk about Home' requires stability and presence that forced displacement has shattered.

2.2 Linguistic Fragmentation and Untranslatability

The memoir under scrutiny is written in English, a language she learned in her adulthood when in Ireland. Yet, Arabic, which is the author's native language, haunts the memoir. This haunting operates not as a sort of bilingualism or code-switching, but rather as an expression of internal fracture, a linguistic division of one's self. If unspeakability sets the limits of what can be said, linguistic fragmentation highlights the conditions of the displaced struggling between two languages. All along the memoir, the author-narrator, temporally, spatially and psychologically, portrays the multiple versions of herself: a child, an adolescent, a young adult, and an exiled moving from Riyadh, to Damascus, Egypt, Lebanon, the US, and Ireland. These multiple versions lead to the emergence of multiple narrative voices: the voice of young Suad, the adolescent Suad and the adult displaced Suad reflecting and commenting on her earlier selves. The narrative, in this case, seems to lack chronological linearity and narrative sequentiality. Aldarra, as any other traumatized person, cannot be coherent simply because trauma has shattered the self that would provide the narrating.

The memoir's structure indicates that the unspeakability of home is introduced in the prologue. Chapter 0, which is not the true beginning of the memoir, narrates Aldarra's departure from Damascus in 2012. This chapter comes as a precursor which announces the existence of a life before trauma. The text's analysis demonstrates that the memoir functions as a formal representation of what Felman labelled "the crisis of witnessing" in which testimony becomes a "critical activity" (*Testimony* 206). This suggests the impossibility for a witness to adequately and genuinely represent traumatic experiences. In Aldarra's work, the crisis of witnessing is clearly represented through narrative fragmentation, temporal shifts, pauses and silences, linguistic variety (the use of Arabic and English languages), and the use of untranslatable words. Linearity in trauma accounts is, thus, unachievable because the conventions of time and causality are shattered (Luckhurst 2008:9).

Aldarra's memoir enacts a linguistic fragmentation for it oscillates from English to Arabic. The former is the language of the other⁴, the language imposed on her as a displaced; the language she chooses to convey her traumatic story with. The latter, her mother tongue which has become a foreign language, appears occasionally to insist on the unavailability of an equivalence in English. Arabic words like *azkar*, *hidjab*, *abaya*, *mahram*, *halal*, *tawaf*, *nasheed*, *zaatar*, *kunafa*, *shisha*⁵, in addition to Arabic proper nouns and place names are used in the memoir to remind us of the Arabo-Islamic background of the author. These words, although embedded in the host language, mark Aldarra's linguistic and cultural belonging and identity. These words are kept in their original language to force the English readers to face the limits of their understanding, thus, their own incompleteness. Through this political behaviour, Aldarra insists on the unavailability of translations. The English-reading audience won't be provided by glossaries, or explanations that will reduce complex concepts to English equivalents void of any cultural and social dimensions.

Aldarra's quest for a language to avoid her linguistic disorientation leads her straight to *Saudade*. The latter is a Portuguese term referring to "a deep nostalgia" as defined in the *Dictionary of the Untranslatables*. Aldarra seems to be lost in translation: she tries to borrow words from other languages and cultures to express her feeling. Actually, her feeling needs to be translated because it resists translation. English, which is the

⁴ This condition reminds us of the Derridean paradox about language: "Je n'ai qu'une langue, et ce n'est pas la mienne." (I have one language; it is not mine) evoked in *Monolingualism of the Other* (1998).

⁵ أذكّار، حجاب، عباية، محرم، حلال، طواف، نشيد، زعتر، كنافة، شيشة



language of her present, sets her afar from her own self; while Arabic, her mother tongue, manifests as a spontaneous overflow of the recollections of her past life.

Conclusion

Throughout the memoir, Aldarra transforms the limits of language from impediments to testimony to productive elements of witnessing. In doing so, she succeeded to elaborate a way of bearing witness that preserves the density and resistance to trauma while communicating its devastating nature. The various theoretical frameworks discussed in this article highlight the various practices of Aldarra. They, to a greater extent, help explain the memoir's linguistic and temporal fragmentation. They also offer a background to understand how Aldarra's silences work at multiple levels in order to respond to the linguistic limits and the social complexities and political necessities. Aldarra urges her readers to hear the hum of words by paying careful attention to what remains unsaid: she does not only ask them to listen to what she is saying, but also to recognize all the silences and gaps as speech acts. This attention requires the reader's willingness to accept that some dimensions of trauma remain inaccessible, unspeakable and untranslatable.

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