

Multifaceted Reading of Fear in Contemporary Novel

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FEAR IN LITERATURE

1. Incorporating Fear in a Literary Work

Literature as an art is most often performed via a cohesion of the sequences of words, sentences, and thoughts that may be formulated for factual purposes or exist for artistic value. Typical with all of its forms such as novel, drama and poetry, literature has an essential role in the lives of many in that it helps them explore cultures and societies around the world. It often enhances the educational capacity of the reader, and at times tackles societal problems with moral lessons presented to readers. It helps a person evaluate an experience and often the emotions behind it by addressing realistic topics. A literary work incorporates fresh characters, ordinary or unorthodox settings and time, in-depth dialogue, various themes and the ultimate plot to tell a story that will reflect the pessimistic dimensions of life as much as it will deliver the optimistic. Consequently, fear, pity, and catharsis are items primarily present in Aristotle's analysis of tragedy. Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotion" (1970, p. 9). A successful tragedy often moves around complex themes and imitates events and actions that arouse dread and pity. Among the themes identified in literature is fear. Aristotle also touches the concept of fear, describing it as "a certain feeling of discomfort or unrest evoked by the idea of being faced with a destructive or painful misfortune" (p. 39). Fear is ubiquitously found in literature as many readers may sympathize with what it evokes in the literary setting, as based on their own personal experiences. In this manner,

a literary writer's craft is quite pedagogical and instructional for presenting an experience to the readers that may scare them as easily as it could delight them by using horrible elements such as fearful themes and descriptions of dread in terms of place, time, and dialogue between characters. In such a case, the work is considered dramatic or gothic, with the writer examining the association of personal experienced fears with their work. According to Mohammadi "fear is dealt with in a plethora of different approaches by using symbols, motifs, context, etc. These concepts help readers observe the protagonist's development" (210). Furthermore, the writer's primary purpose in such works is to keep the reader's attention via suspense and fear. Many writers have written about fear itself as well, from different perspectives; examining the types of fear. *Necrophobia*, the fear of death, is considered the most commonly found fear in people by psychologists as people tend to fear the unknown introduced by death. Phobia is a recurring element in works such as *Fear of Dying Alone* by Erica Jong, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, *Fear* by Steven Zweig and *Seven Terrors* by Selvedin Avdić. In the case of the latter work, the writer even introduces a list of seven fears: *necrophobia*, the fear of death; *hypochondria*, the fear of illnesses; *autophobia*, the fear of being alone; *achluophobia*, the fear of darkness; *atyphobia*, the fear of failure; *anthropophobia*, the fear of society; and finally *glossophobia*, the fear of speaking in public.

The aforementioned name of gothic as a genre refers to art that is marked by death, fear, terror, depression and gloom. Central theme of the gothic piece is often based on terror and a state of fear. Fear naturally triggers three

reactions: fight, flight, or freeze. Writers provide a description of elements that are eerie or fear-evoking such as ancient castles, supernatural figures, a barren earth, stormy weather or the night time. External agents of horror are also sometimes present, such as blood, ferocious animals, water dripping in the darkness, and war. Consequently, an atmosphere of mystery and suspense is almost always found in gothic literature. A fear is enhanced by the unknown. The atmosphere is sometimes advanced when characters see only a glimpse of something like a person rushing out the window. Often the plot itself is built around a mystery, such as a disappearance, or some other inexplicable event. Furthermore, the writer of gothic novels can increase and decrease the degree of fear in a story by introducing threats. Ultimately, gothic literature is defined as "a literary movement that focused on rain, decay, death, terror and chaos and privileged irrationally and passion over rationality and reason, grew in response to the historical sociological, psychological and political contexts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century" (Gale, 2016, p. 1). Gothic movement appears in the late 18th and 19th centuries in an environment where explorations in branches of religion and science allow the writer to write about death, fear, decay, ghosts, ambiguous things, distraction and madness freely. In fact, all these themes present different sorts of fears to the readers; a goal subscribed to by a majority of gothic writers.

To present some of the Gothic writers; Edgar Allan Poe is well known to use these elements in his short story *The Black Cat*, and he named the cat the work's title refers to as Pluto, after the God of dead in the ancient Roman religion. Another example would be Mary Shelley and her novel *Frankenstein*. It sets off as the typical ghost story, and she presents the events of the novel in the middle of dark cemeteries and gloomy castles to increase fearful emotions. Much like other Gothic writers, her works are melodramas; stories in which the characters show exaggerated emotions, such as panic and dread in Shelley's case, to impact the reader. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Gilman, a woman who suffers from depression, frustration and fear is the main focus. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte show the main characters Heathcliff and Catherine as influenced by sorrow, deprivation and doom during the events of novel. And as such, these writers use elements of gothic literature, such as crime, madness, and murder, in their novels to evoke fear in the readers and to arouse pity.

H. P. Lovecraft (1927) claims that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear". He offers that the ambiguity is the origin that trigger fear (p. 12). Furthermore, Zygmunt Bauman divides fear in literature into two types: "liquid fear", and "solid fear". He also determines three categories as the source of fear: the fear of nature, such as an earthquake, the fear of being killed by wars, death and illness; and the fear of god. Consequently, Bauman refers to fear in the past as a solid one; unchangeable, static and clear. In the classical age, people are afraid of gods, goddesses, and other supernatural beings that are invoked in sleep with fear. Conversely, in the medieval period, the time of the profound fear, H. P. Lovecraft offers that many horror themes were presented in literature for the first time; middle-age is the age of fear production. Moreover, Bauman delivers that at the present fear is regarded as liquid, dynamic and complex; life is always in developments in terms of common techniques and observations. Naturally, literature flourished in this period as the gothic novel appeared and readers came to accept this kind of fearful novels as they reflected relatable dimensions of the society (Bauman, 2017, p. 22). To summarize, the classical text of literature may allow less space for fear in comparison with more contemporary literary systems in which social and cultural developments allow global challenges as integral parts of life.

1.1. Mechanism of Fear in a Broad Sense

In fear, a person is challenging something outside themselves, and what they challenge is the opposite of what they want or need; we are afraid of losing essentials such as freedom, health, and identity. Fear is a kind of emotion that arises from threatening or dangerous events that a person faces. Death, disasters, and the unknown are expected invokers of fear. To take one case, the fear of death is a definite fact and people are scared of the tomb and its darkness due to the fact that the world after death is implicit and people tend to be afraid of an ambiguous destiny.

Fear has many lexical connotations such as panic, terror, horror, and dread. In fact, there is a distinction between two major terms: *fear* and *fearlessness*. Fear is defined as "[an] emotional reaction to the perceived threat, there is a strong relationship between the threat encountered and the degree of fear experienced, but fear is not experienced by objective danger". Thus, there is a link

between fear and experience. In contrast, M. K. Gupta (2010) comments that fearlessness "should mean complete absence of all fears, fear of death, fear of physical assault, fear of hunger, fear of insects, fear of public criticism, fear of ghosts, fear of someone's anger. Freedom from these types and all other fears is fearlessness" (p. 10).

Fear is known to inhibit action and the ability to establish control. For instance, when a person decides to take a big step in their life for the first time, such as getting married or traveling to a new country, they may hesitate as many questions and self-reflections would arise on their capability and their unknown future. It is important to realize that fear functions as a protective and alarming instrument; it notifies individuals against the nearest danger to secure them from hazardous situations. It is essentially a defensive mechanism that leads to either changing attitudes or escaping from the trigger; a process called *fight* or *flight* where the body generates stress through a sudden move, and this stress is combined with fear and panic, along with shallow breath, lack of inhaling and exhaling, and tightness in the chest and throat. Thus, the relationship between fear and stress is paralleled (Seals, 2015, p. 37). Moreover, fear is also provoked by either abstract ideas or concrete objects. The abstract ideas are generated by the imaginative capabilities of the human mind, such as sighting a ghost. They can be described as abnormal types of fear. In contrast, concrete objects are visible items and have physical denotations in that they can be sensed and seen. It is not the object that provokes fear; it is the way humans perceive the object. For example, if someone interprets an object as delightful, he will feel happy; if he comprehends it as horrible, he will feel dreadful. (Sevnsen, 1970, p. 34). Practically, security is induced behind fears; for instance, when a person rescues themselves from external risks using a self-defense mechanism, this case is known as the need for security. Hence, it is considered as one of the fundamental requirements to survive that it is equal to eating and breathing. Without fear, there is no need for security, and ultimately, both fear and security are basic elements for life. It can be said that human life fluctuates between two poles: the negative pole which signifies fear, and the positive pole which denotes security. So, a person without safety will suffer from fear, and without fear, they would not possibly understand the value of safety. The reason behind resisting fears is the desire of human beings to survive.

Many scholars investigated how fear is activated, starting with Charles Darwin. Attributed with the moniker of the father of evolution, he was the first scholar who examined the evaluation of emotion and how it combines with fear in his theory of evolution. Darwin's theory expresses how fear is activated and developed in critical events. In 1877, he stated that fear has evolutionary foundations; when he went with his son to the zoo, Darwin noted that the child was afraid of animal in the cage. Yet later, he desired to return to the source of his fear. Darwin observed by this experience that children's fears are inherited (Milosevic and Randi, 2015, p. 134). He concluded that "fear was expressed from an extremely remote period in almost the same manner as it now is by man" (Rush and Dozier, 2015, p. 5). Darwin concluded that humans confront different types of fears, and the confrontation of fears helped people survive. Additionally, emotion is a word that refers to human traits such as love, hate, pride, fear, envy, jealousy, and anxiety; all phenomena that are parts of the human experience. Furthermore, these phenomena almost have cognitive and physical aspects; but it differs from person to person. Hence, emotions are a combination of physical and mental entities. Emotions are expressed by body language, facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact. There are emotions such as happiness, expressed with a smile; and melancholy, which can be gestured by tears. However, the emotion of fear is not as evidently recognized by facial expressions, but it can be interpreted by physical movements such as escaping or striking. On the other hand, John Watson, an American psychologist, established a school of *behaviorism*. The term refers to the theory of learning which explains that behaviors are acquired during interactions with experiences; thus, experiences can articulate the behavior of a man. In 1924, Watson was considered the father of behaviorism. In his article "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It", Watson (2009) states that psychology must be based on behavior instead of mentality. Further, he believes that "development depends on learning given the proper experience leaning will proceed" (p. 91).

Any person regardless of their gender, age and education may act in different manners and the experience can be learned from differing circumstances. This theory rejects Freudian concepts of *ego*, *superego* and *id*, because these are internal functions and cannot be studied or observed, as he states. John Watson demonstrates that the importance of learning experimental design is to prove that

children's fears are learned, not born; in this case, this theory rejects the concept of inherited fears. On the contrary, it states fears are learned or acquired from the surrounding circumstances. Watson's experiment was performed on a child named Albert. He notices that the child learns to be scared of a white rat presented to him as a stimulus. Whenever the rat makes an appearance, a disturbing sound is presented. The child links the dreadful noise with the white rat over time. Ultimately, he learns to fear from the association of the white rat with the disruptive noise. John Watson then concludes that fears can be learned by factors of the social environment. For instance, if a person is afraid of a white rat in the laboratory, he will be scared of all-white creatures, even white monkeys, rabbits, or cats because the dreadful experience is suppressed in the person's unconscious part of the mind. Consequently, Canadian psychologist Donald O. Hebb supports Watson's theory, and proposes that, with "*the sudden disruption of an established neural connection in the cortex causing fear*", animals and humans are frightened by the unknown or the sudden changes (Gray, 1987, p. 95) He offers that disruption of fearful person results from struggle, shortage, or sudden change.

Furthermore, Michael Burton explains the concept of fear from a physiological perspective. Fear creates panic and dread, and they have an impact on the temperature of the body. He propounds that there is a correspondence between mental and reaction of the body in case of understanding fear's passions. The interpretations of fear were observed widely by sociologists, physiologists and the primary explanation depended on Aristotelian's explanation of comprehension and perception, in which the imagination conveys an impression of something (received through the senses or called up by the memory) to the brain (Daniel and Mason, 2018, p. 44) .With an apprehensive imagination, the brain sends codes to the body to convey impressions about something that will happen soon. Hence, blood moves from the brain to heart and the rest of body as biological reactions, and by this process, physical symptoms are exhibited and temperature changes. All parts of the body are alerted by the mind of the fearful person. Also, Robert c. Bolles explains bodily and brain-sourced reactions against danger and risk and how to avoid them by establishing a theory of the species-specific defense reaction (1970). According to this theory, an avoidance stimulates the human innate defense system if the reaction belongs to the innate defense system so that the avoidance

response will be acquired rapidly. Conversely, if the defense response is not part of the human innate system, the avoidance reaction will be slower (Bolles, 1970, p. 7) . This hypothesis suggests that every species has its repertoire of innate defensive behaviors and humans perform this behavior unconditionally when they are frightened (Weiner, 2003, p. 44). When a person is performing fleeting, fighting and escaping these defensive behaviors without condition, it means that the person has learned to perform this behavior as a result of different experiences.

To put it differently, Jeffrey Alan Cray (1971) remarks that there are two superordinate categories of fear: innate and learned. Concerning the former category, some people are born with inherent fears without origins, and others are saturated by fears because of external factors like society, parents, culture, age, gender and education. The child is born with three types of fears: fear from sudden sounds or noise, fear from pain, and fear from strangers. Concerning the latter category, Gray states that it can be attributed to a previous personal experience, for example, phobia of a snake perhaps occurs because the person has been bitten by a snake in their childhood. Indeed, fear is not only an innate emotion, but it is also a learned emotion, and these types vary from person to person depending on different circumstances (as cited in Blythe, 2004, p. 243).

Consequently, scholars of psychology observed that a fearful person has physical symptoms; these symptoms reflect on body language via shouting, jumping, rubbing the hands as a sign of tension because of fears and sweating. While some tend to escape from the source of danger, others tend to freeze. Subsequently, it is understood that the physiological symptoms of fear are different from one person to another. However, common symptoms include chest pain, stomach pain, shivering, dry mouth, perspiration, queasiness, quivering, rapid heartbeat, and lack of breath. (Fritscher, 2019). Moreover, the severity and degree of reaction depend on the person and the situation. Reactions pass within three levels in fear: First, the behavioral level refers to the physical attitudes of a person that is escaping, withdrawing, or ignoring others. Second, the physiological level denotes the symptoms that appear in situations that relate to fear, such as lack of sleep, headaches, tension, stress, difficulties in inhalation and exhalation, and lack of energy. Finally, the cognitive level refers to the self-evaluation and how it is linked with fears.

1.2. Faces of Fear in Shahad Al Rawi's *The Baghdad Clock*

The Baghdad Clock (2016) is a novel by the Iraqi writer Shahad Al Rawi. It was originally written in Arabic and later translated to English by Luka Leafgren in 2018. The novel is a winner of Edinburgh International Book Festival First Book Award in Arabic fiction. The book comprises three main parts. The title of the novel, *The Baghdad Clock*, is symbolic in that it refers to a political, historical and social vision about the capital city of Iraq, Baghdad; and Mesopotamia, the Ancient historical site of major civilizations that is located between the Tigris and the Euphrates. A clock can be understood to symbolize not only time but also the longevity of Baghdad as a city of the past and today. Practically, it also refers to an iconic public building in Baghdad that contains a museum and four faces with four clocks and a high tower. The four clocks refer to a different time with four directions; for example, when it is six o'clock in the morning, if someone stood in the north of Baghdad, on the opposite side it is one a clock in the afternoon, while on a peripheral side it is five clock in the evening, and for the opposite peripheral a two after midnight, depending on where a person may be standing. The difference of time is to symbolize arbitrariness and confusion of Baghdad's people in times of war. The concept of time is linked with fear in one way or another; just as how time has different faces in Baghdad's four-clocked building, fears also have many faces or aspects in the novel. Characters experience time differently according to their positions and fears.

Furthermore, the style of the writer is understood as straightforward, and spontaneous; the language is clear and direct, simple words and sentences with profound meaning, cohesion, and coherence between sentences, paragraphs and concepts are prominent. There is a kind of sequence of correlation between the current events of Iraq and its history established via concise and accurate descriptions and depictions. She uses in her narrative style Iraqi proverbs and slang songs to attract the attention of readers, and in some parts of the novel, the narrator even moves from imaginative to realistic events and dreams. The novel's events shift from simplistic to philosophical, and conversely, the events in these parts are represented differently; a simple section is presented directly whereas a philosophical chapter is delivered indirectly as a way to show a complete picture of the novel.

The novel consists of three parts, the first one of which is named "A Childhood of Unobvious Things". There is a clear vision or depiction about the events of the story; Al Rawi opens a realistic window to depict logical events during a war with American and Persian Gulf War in 1991. The novel starts with a young female girl, a nameless narrator, perhaps the writer herself. The innocent girl meets her friend Nadia for the first time in the shelter and they become friends. Their story starts from a place of unfavorable and stark properties.

As a matter of fact, a shelter is a wide area providing protection from external dangers; it is considered to be a secure place. The narrator and Nadia with their families live in a shelter because of the Persian Gulf war. The friends play together, and sirens are heard to warn the incoming bombs. The sirens serve as elements to evoke terror and tragedy in the reader. The narrating character leads Nadia to their mothers, and during the said action an oil lantern is broken and a fire breaks out. Frozen with fear, the girls are horrified. Others cite from the Quran as the fire spreads and the distant noise of the bombing gets louder and closer, not knowing what to do. These are essentially all signs of fear, as they seek safety in god. The terrorized atmosphere in the shelter and the grim qualities of life as caused by war provokes the young narrator to inform her mother of her suicidal tendencies, "mama, yes, my love. Do you know what I want from you ? what Do you want? I do not want to be here in this world " (Al Rawi, 2016, p. 6) .

The final sentence in the conversation between the mother and the young protagonist attests to many things. To begin with, it is as tragic for the reader's taste as it is difficult for the mother for an innocent child to seek death as a means of escape from all the terror and fear and frustration; emotions that are more manageable by adults, but not children. Within a normally functioning society, it is clearly abnormal for a child to experience such emotions. The forms of fear are global in the novel, especially when readers are introduced to the events from a child's perspective:

I got to know Nadia in the belly of this shelter that looked like a big concrete whale. A damp place fortified against the war, our fantasies flitted across the walls. We spent more than twenty

nights in the shelter in 1991 when the Baghdad sky blazed with planes and rockets. Moreover, during those long weeks, we lived through fear, cold, and hunger, sharing our hopes and dreams. We did not know at the time what was happening around us. We did not understand then what the war meant (Al Rawi, 2016, p. 7)

Generally, the child in the earlier phases of the book is almost always afraid of things to an irrational extent because of her immature nature, despite, or perhaps also due to, having observed the terror introduced by bombs, rockets, warplanes, and other instruments of fear and terror. As they strive in harsh conditions with an ambiguity of what their future will be due the threat of impending death, their fears are further invigorated by the fear of the unknown and the fear of change. However, despite the dangerous and unstable environment, there is still a sign of hope in the characters' minds and precisely that of the narrator. She often dreams of better conditions. While on a positive note this is a symbol for hope, on the shortcoming side of reality, it is essentially a coping mechanism; a means to escape from the harsh reality. Subsequently, the preceding quote reflects three fears: the fear of death by bomb or rockets, the fear of isolation, and the fear of future and its ambiguity.

We arrived at the wall, and as we were about to scribble on the clean wall of their house, Uncle Shawkat came out to us and grabbed us. He gave Nadia a gentle pinch on the ear and imprinted a clock deep on the skin of her wrist. It hurt a little, and Nadia was about to cry. Pain mixed with shame and a small tear shone in her eye. (Al Rawi, 2016, p. 28)

After twenty days in the shelter, the families return to their neighborhoods, and as the setting changes, so do the different types of fears. The young girl and Nadia play together in the street, but they do not go far from their houses for fear of strangers in the streets. They count houses

and draw on the walls with colored chalk when Uncle Shawkat appears. Dynamic and often sarcastic, he is married to Baji Nadra. The young protagonist witnesses as he tries to punish Nadia for drawing on the walls. Nadia is introduced to physical and psychological abuse that results in panic, stress, and ultimately fear:

After a group of boys had visit the young girl and Nadia, the young girl is thinking at night. The boys inform the two girls that the national school test was declared. She failed in the English exam. The narrator panicks, and her fear is depicted by the writer. She is then subjected to a process of self-reflection caused by a fear of failure:

Every time fear filled my heart, I would tell myself, 'They're lying! I didn't forget. I'm good at every subject, especially English. I memorized the book cover to cover! How could it have failed such an easy subject? Furthermore, how could Nadia have failed everything when she is one of the smartest students in the school? Why hadn't Marwa's results appeared if these were the national tests? I wanted to get up from my bed and go I was choking on this atmosphere of fear that prevented me from sleeping. It was a time when the electricity had gone out, which happened a lot in those days. I got up and went to the kitchen, where I opened the refrigerator and drank a lot of water. When I went back to bed, I fell asleep immediately without another thought about the results. (Al Rawi, 2016, p. 34)

The young girl later puts a certain amount of thought to her uncle's inner world when his wife Baji Nadra goes missing, citing her mother's mention of Uncle Shawkat being afraid of dying alone. In natural circumstances, it is reasonable to fear loss, but Uncle Shawkat's fear leads to other types of fears, such as fear of isolation and loneliness as well as death. The novel covers different types of fears by different characters with unfamiliar attitudes and actions as has been caused by wars

occurring since 1988. Thus, the novel depicts all realistically negative events by characters from different ages, genders, identities and places in Baghdad.

In the second part of the novel, titled "Letters from the Unknown", is the turning point where fear shifts to future and stems from ambiguity. The neighborhood is visited by a fortune teller, a tall and lean man with a well-trimmed beard, who predicts events of the future. He tells them that he does not see a future for them in their current residences, and that they should leave the city because of the coming storms. By wars, he likely alludes to war and hardships. Women are teary eyed upon hearing the news, but the theme of facing the harsh reality is played out by the narrator. While some believe in what the man has to say for their futures, some oppose his warnings, though they too have suspected of the upcoming events themselves. In reality, the characters that live in the neighborhood are ultimately afraid of the future and its unknown properties because of wars, general lack of safety, and death:

Our neighborhood had not been the same since the soothsayer's visit. It became somewhat depressing, and its people were afflicted with misgivings about the future, having lost hope that any sense of well-being would return to their lives. The soothsayer was not, in fact, responsible for this dejection. Like a doctor who informs you that you are sick and must take a bitter medicine immediately, he had merely told us that we were unhappy. In those days, men, women, and children would sit in small circles, occupying this corner or that, reviewing the man's tidings amongst themselves, with each person explaining it thing he had said was correct, but they disagreed about the nature of the truth in his words. (Al Rawi, 2016, p. 78)

The young girl observes women as they commit suicide by throwing themselves from a bridge into the Tigris. It is in winter, and the water is cold, symbolizing a static and harsh reality where war and the sanction of 2003 has frozen the

minds of the Iraqi people with fear. Starvation, poverty, deprivation, and war have caused many Iraqis to commit suicide. Consequently, the narrator is affected by this violent environment to a degree where she may require psychological therapy to overcome the trauma and fear:

I was afraid I would see another man or woman jump from the bridge. Sometimes I imagined people standing in a long line in front of the bridge, killing themselves in groups, one after another. But what is it that the war will do? Will it end the sanctions? Will those who left come back when the sanctions are dropped? Will Uncle Shawkat become an elegant man again in his dark suit, his white shirt, his blue 6' and his shoes? Will Biryad disappear from our lives? Will he love us more because we give him more food? (Alrawi, 2016, p. 126).

Primarily, safety and shelter are basic human rights; the narrator describes to the reader the complete picture of the recent war where she lives a life full of various fears and anxiety. It must be noted that she is likely a representative of the young Iraqi generation. The negative impact of war is prominent in her speech: the war has economic, sociological and psychological factors and influences such as hysteria and personality disorders. Consequently, the narrating young girl is rendered fearful of almost anything that bears the slightest resemblance to military elements; even patriotic poems.

I did not want the bridges to fall dead into want anyone else to die—the water. I did not want our house to shake with the rockets; yes, I am afraid, very afraid of the war. Afraid even declarations, its songs, its music, and its patriotic poem", could I not be afraid when planes hover in the sky and Out death in straight lines? Why

did I have to witness all this in a single lifetime?" War in my childhood, sanctions as a teenager, and a new" With advanced smart bombs when I have not yet reached twenty. How can a normal person tell their personal life story when they move from one war to another as they grow up (Alrawi, 2016, p. 128).

1.3. Fear in Susan Harrison's *The Silent Wife*

The Silent Wife (2013) is a novel by Canadian writer Susan Harrison. Published under the pen name A. S. A. Harrison, it was her first novel. It has received critical acclaim as one of the best-seller novels by most Canadian magazines. As a psychological thriller it is divided into two parts. The first part, containing 28 chapters, switches between the characters Todd Gilbert and Judi Brett, a married couple. The process of switches between chapters and the husband and wife, titled as "Him" and "Her" in an orderly manner, sheds light on the alternative sequences of the novel's events. Moreover, it attracts the reader's attention because of narrational manipulations. The novel is narrated by a third-person pronoun as the narrator uses her and him during the narration process to describing marital problems such as cheating in a marriage, the lack of communication between husband and wife, and how it all leads to betrayal. The first part of the novel conveys to the readers the differing perspectives of Todd's and Judi's internal thoughts, feelings including fear, anxiety, jealousy, and tension; conflicts and selfish love against each other, the changes that happen to the husband and wife during the storms of marriage. The second part of the novel constitutes a twist for the readers, and it focuses on how the elegant, calm, educated woman transforms into a killer to seek revenge from her ex-husband.

The title of the work refers to the wife's silent nature and the mystery it presents to the husband. This silence may be caused by unsatisfying relationships, depression, marital problems, or finally a turning point where a long-tolerant woman, or wife, decides to seek revenge pre-emptively and without warning as in Judi's case. In this regard, the readers are introduced to suspense and excitement. The novel opens with Jodi in September in her flat in Chicago; she lives in an apartment with an

unobstructed view with a lake and the sky. Though aged forty five, she considers herself as being young. Despite the fact that she is a psychotherapist, murder for her is only a word without action or meaning as she has established self-control and patience as her values; she is calm, elegant, and collected. On the other hand, the forty-six year-old Todd is a successful man who often seeks relationships with women, is a cheater, and selfish in general. He believes that a man can love more than one woman, and attracts women with his style, mannerism, and financial stability. Todd has lived with Jodi in Chicago for more than twenty years; their marriage is fruitless, and their bond is almost non-existent because Jodi is always busy with her patients. She cares for her physical appearance and social status. Todd is generally interested in his business and affairs with different women. In view of these points, the husband and wife have separable lives in the same household.

Jodi prepares dinner for Todd, participates in the gym, and besides her part-time job she is concerned with her patients. Despite helping many with their psychological problems and being well educated, in the end, she too has her own fears. She is complicated in that regard, as she fears loneliness and isolation as her marriage is childless. To cope with her fears, she resorts to her daily routine:

Daily routine is the great balm that keeps her spirits up and holds her life together, warding off the existential fright that can take you by ambush anytime you're dithering or at a loss, reminding you of the magnitude of the void you are sitting on. Keeping busy is the middle-class way—a practical way and a good way. She enjoys the busywork of scheduling clients, running her household, and keeping herself fit and groomed. She likes things orderly and predictable and feels secure when her time is mapped out well in advance. (Harrison, 2013, p. 26).

The earlier chapters describe an experience Todd has with his lover Natasha, who is the daughter of his best friend Dean. A young college girl, she is immature,

grumpy, hasty and reckless. Todd has a secret affair with Natasha, who wants to marry him as the concept of marriage is an unprecedented experience for her. It must be noted that Natasha is aware of Todd being a cheating husband in nature, but she believes that he loves his wife. Jodi is a source of his power, but with her, the matter is different; she is a subject of his love, not ambitions. Todd hopes that Natasha bears his child.

Natasha's primary condition for marriage is that Todd divorces Jodi and forgets about her. Both Todd and she show selfish and irresponsible personality traits throughout the book, yet Todd has his own fears present in his cognitive process. He fears that Dean will discover his secret affair with his daughter, and is afraid of what his reaction may be if he were to find out. Additionally, Natasha is a young and beautiful woman who is younger than Todd by more than twenty years; thus, the age difference leads to insecurities and fear as well as jealousy. Moreover, Todd is hesitant and timid when it comes to conflicts in his relationships, as he is immature and irrational at times. He declares that he cannot live without Natasha, but the actual reason for this self-imposed belief stems from his fear of isolation, confrontation, and abandonment.

Later in the book, a fearful Jodi is illustrated as being afraid of the future. She comes to understand the extent of the romantic relationship between her husband and Natasha, and she is afraid of confronting Natasha and Todd. She refuses to challenge Todd, whom she knows to be promiscuous in his relationships, because she is afraid of what his reaction may be. Eventually, she realizes that her relationship with Todd are not to last long as Natasha is pregnant. Todd is later depicted as a hollow man and a body without a soul as constant drinking and cheating has had its toll on his well-being.

The scene is later shifted from Jodi to Todd and Natasha, the husband and the young girl; the preparation for new marriage is finished. Natasha attracts Todd's attention ultimately and manipulates him. In the past, when with Jodi, Todd was a smart businessman, and despite his promiscuity, he was stable. When with Natasha, Todd is an unstable, confused and fearful man. He fears the ambiguous and unpredictable future with her, fears failing his plans as well as his marriage, and he fears the challenges that may be introduced by Jodi. With his newly introduced fears as well as the old, and his already selfish and morally questionable nature, Todd is ultimately rendered an

unstable man. He is afraid of confrontation with Jodi to a level that he sends a letter by his lawyer to inform her that she should leave the apartment. In short, Todd is described as a timid and cowardly man:

Natasha has insisted that he take the day off work. He's agreed to show up at her place around ten, to coincide with the arrival of the movers. Her junky furniture and kitchenware will at least give them something to start with. One thing Todd is not going to do is fight with Jodi over household goods. Whatever happens, he will not turn this into a petty squabble. The breakup is going to cost him, that much he knows, but the fear he has about his financial future is still indeterminate, a specter without shape or form. He's avoided giving it substance in the same way that he's avoided a lot of things. Calling his lawyer, for instance. Telling Jodi that he's leaving. (Harrison, 2013, p. 101)

Following the chapter with Todd, Jodi receives the letter from Todd's lawyer, instructing her to ultimately depart from the flat. She is not only surprised, but also thoroughly and negatively affected. Todd's treatment of her comes as unexpected. She cycles through various extreme emotions from upset to dreadful, and spends eight nights in isolation. Throughout this period, her energetic nature is changed and her daily routine is deconstructed. Her fears surface, and she is afraid of loneliness and confrontation with her problems. She has episodic predictions of the future as well as reimagined, metaphorical or even distorted accounts of what has occurred; going so far as to liken her situation to that of someone whose relatives have been murdered. Day and night, fear dominates her psyche and she loses her sense of security and safety. It should be noted that, much like Todd, she is subsequently deprived of her stability in life. She becomes a drunkard, requires medication to be able to sleep, and exhibits various facial expressions that are irrational or previously unlikely as a result of being fearful and insecure.

The events of the novel evolve into a new climax when Jodi starts her plans of murdering Todd with the help of her friend Alison by hiring a hitman. As a matter of fact, many reasons push Jodi for revenge, from having lost her sense of belonging to her fears of ambiguity, as well as the fact that the common law dictates her to be devoid of any post-marital rights as she is the wife. Jodi tries to re-establish justice, and has him shot in the head. Following his death, paranoia takes control in her psyche, as the recently divorced ex-wife is a predictable and rather common suspect when a man is murdered. Afraid of legal punishment, she is hesitant whenever a phone or door is rung. Being disposed, isolation, and criminal involvement all stake her fears to an extreme degree:

The sense of security and optimism she felt after reading the article in the paper—neither the car nor the perpetrators had been identified—is now displaced by the belated realization that being the victim’s ex-spouse automatically makes her the prime suspect, and that it will only be worse if she’s named in the will. The fact that this did not occur to her before—while she was plotting and scheming with Alison, hawking her household goods, fleeing to the tropics—she finds astonishing. It’s as if she’s been in some kind of trance, a self-induced hypnotic state, a stupor of wishful thinking. She panicked when the call came through in Florida, but that was nothing that you could sleep off or drown in drink. This, what she feels now, is vicious and barbed, like circulation returning to dead limbs, like someone has shaken her up and made her blood fizz. (Harrison, 2013, p. 192)

The later section describes a scene where a police officer meets Jodi in her apartment, and he asks her questions related to the crime. While normally any person would feel paranoid when being questioned by the law

enforcement officers regardless of whether they are guilty or not, Jodi’s paranoia is further staked. She is afraid of his questions, because the wrong answers are likely to threaten her way of life and her safety. She ultimately faints, and later takes resort by the window to metaphorically release her fears and cover her hesitation as well as dread of punishment; actions that hint at her being the person responsible for Todd Gilbert’s death.

“After the funeral, life picks up its normal rhythms. She’s back to her morning dog walks, her workouts, her clients, and dinner with friends. But her habitual poise and self-assurance are gone. She no longer inhabits her world with any degree of composure, and over the passing days she comes to feel appalled by what she’s gone and done, unable to grasp how it could have happened. Every morning when she wakes up there’s a time delay before she remembers, a peaceful second or two before it hits her, and it always hits her in the same way: like a news flash. Time passes but the facts refuse to settle and recede. She feels that in killing him off she killed off parts of herself as well.” (Harrison, 2013, p. 205)

Following Todd’s funeral and life returning to its status quo, Jodi’s daily routine is re-introduced. She walks her dog, works with her clients, exercises in the gym, and interacts with her friends, but in the end, she is guilty of not being able to help herself in that her body is not as much controlled by her once stable mind but rather by waves of negative feelings such as fear, stress, and sorrow. As a result of the crime and the terrible atmosphere begotten from betrayal, insecurities and crime, Jodi as a character is deprived of her positive traits. Ultimately, fear unmakes her.

1.4. Fear in Khaled Hosseini’s *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

A Thousand Splendid Suns is a novel by Afghan-American writer Khaled Hosseini published in 2007 for the first time. Hosseini was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, where the events of the novel takes place in Kabul. In this vein, it is understood that the content of his novel inevitably inherits traces from his personal experiences. The writer incorporates Arabic words such as *harami*, *jinni*, and *burqa* that hint at his multicultural identity. Though the words may not be translated word-for-word, the Anglophone reader may depend on context to make sense of them. Divided into

four parts, the novel depicts various events and struggles between the characters surrounding the protagonist Miriam. Her life is described from birth to death throughout the book. The story sets off with Miriam's childhood and her life with Nana. She grows up without a father, because she is an illegitimate child (a *harami*). In the second part, Miriam is a married woman who is subjected to constant psychological and physical abuse and misogyny by her husband. The third part covers Leila, Rasheed's second wife, and ultimately the fourth part deals with Miriam's death and Leila's new life with her beloved Tariq and their children. The language of the novel is direct, simplistic and clear, yet metaphors, proverbs, simile and variations in style are the devices with which the narration reaches to the audience.

The title of the novel is cited from the Persian poem "*Kabul*" by Saib Tabrizi, and it signifies two directions: first, the novel sets off with returning hope in an otherwise gloomy world; the dawn after the dusk, rebirth from the ashes, and creation after destruction are the themes incorporated. The narrative opens with Miriam, a five year old girl living with her mother Nana. She is a *harami*, a child born out of marriage, which is taboo in her society. In this vein, Miriam is at a disadvantage ever since being born.

In one instance, Miriam accidentally breaks a sugar bowl; as a result, Nana is infuriated, and chooses to abuse her. She calls her a "clumsy little *harami*" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 4). The word, as understood from the general contextual identity of the book, refers to an unwanted, if not sinful, person. While Nana loves Miriam, she still blames her for her mistakes with Jalil, her daughter's father. Seeing her as an object of shame and taboo, Nana often exposes Miriam to her rage. Miriam is afraid that a *jinni*, a demon of sorts, may enter Nana's body at any given time and take control, turning her into the infuriated person with irrational facial expressions. She is uneducated and young, and naturally she develops such inexplicable fears. Additionally, the constant abuse takes its toll on her personality; she lacks self-confidence, becomes aggressive, and turns fearful with many things:

She feared she might say hurtful things if she stayed: that she knew the *jinn* was a lie, that Jalil had told her that what Nana had was a disease with

a name and that pills could make it better. She might have asked Nana why she refused to see Jalil's doctors, as he had insisted she do, why she wouldn't take the pills he'd bought for her. If she could articulate it, she might have said to Nana that she was tired of being an instrument, of being lied to, laid claim to, used. That she was sick of Nana twisting the truths of their life and making her, Miriam, another of her grievances against the world. You're afraid, Nana, she might have said. You're afraid that I might find the happiness you never had. And you don't want me to be happy. You don't want a good life for me. You're the one with the wretched heart. (Hosseini, 2007, p. 31)

Although a rich man who claims to love his daughter, Jalil refuses to accept Miriam into his family of nine legitimate children and three wives. As a consequence, Nana and Miriam live in a rural settlement away from Kabul. While her father often brings her gifts and claims to love her, he puts in little effort and sacrifices almost nothing to exercise love, whereas her mother, spiteful and resenting in conversations, devotes her life to her. Nana also refuses to send Miriam to school, she is of the belief that unintelligent girls such as Nana do not belong to schools. Miriam's life with her mother is full of dread with everyday interactions that result in her being abused verbally. Ultimately, Miriam is brainwashed by Jalil into disliking Nana, and even accuses her of envying Jalil's love of her. She believes that Nana uses her only as an object by which to exploit Jalil and punish him for their past. However, Miriam is still fearful of Nana, who is in return fearful of Jalil. While Jalil goes to extreme lengths to make Miriam love him, and manipulates her regularly, he will not have her incorporated into his family, offering his social environment as the reason; an environment where "one wrong look" or "one improper word" will result in such violent ways that "blood is spilled" (Hosseini, 2007, p. 75).

The narrative is eventually shifted from childhood to adulthood. Miriam is married to Rasheed, a shoemaker who is typically aggressive. After a few days of marriage,

Rasheed instructs Miriam that he wants an ideally submissive and obedient wife. Miriam initially thinks that by marrying Rasheed, she has escaped from her fears of abandonment, since her mother has died and his father now despises her. She seeks to find a sense of security in marriage. Soon enough, however, Miriam is subjected to mistreatment. She is instructed with household chores, and is treated as a maid rather than a wife. At night, Rasheed talks about women and how he does not like how they are uncovered, and that they look into his eyes directly without shame, that they put on make-up and wear skirts. He is a conservative and traditional man, and subsequently wants Miriam to wear a *burqa*, a religious headscarf. Miriam is surprised, and unwilling; yet, she fears confronting Rasheed, and submits to his will.

Four years into the marriage, Miriam discovers that she is unable to bear a child. Rasheed turns very violent in her mistreatment of her as a result. He abuses and scorns her constantly, which Miriam does not try to confront out of fear. Living in silence with fear, she finds herself trembling with fear even from hearing his footsteps. In one instance, when Rasheed does not find the meal prepared by Miriam to his liking, he does not hesitate to abuse her:

He shook the rice angrily from his fingers and pushed the plate away, spilling sauce and rice on the *sofrah*. Miriam watched as he stormed out of the living room, then out of the house, slamming the door on his way out. Miriam kneeled to the ground and tried to pick up the grains of rice and put them back on the plate, but her hands were shaking badly, and she had to wait for them to stop. Dread pressed down on her chest. She tried taking a few deep breaths. She caught her pale reflection in the darkened living-room window and looked away. Then she heard the front door opening, and Rasheed was back in the living room. "Get up," he said. "Come here. Get up." He snatched her hand, opened it, and dropped a handful of pebbles into it. "Put these in your mouth." "What?" "Put. These. In your

mouth." "Stop it, Rasheed, I'm-" His powerful hands clasped her jaw. He shoved two fingers into her mouth and pried it open, then forced the cold, hard pebbles into it. Miriam struggled against him, mumbling, but he kept pushing the pebbles in, his upper lip curled in a sneer. "Now chew," he said. Through the mouthful of grit and pebbles, Miriam mumbled a plea. Tears were leaking out of the corners of her eyes. (Hosseini, 2007, p. 110) (Show the beginning & the end of Quotation!!).

Miriam becomes further submissive and fearful of Rasheed, however; physical abuse leads to psychological injuries, and it generates fear, anxiety, self-destruction and hesitation. Miriam loses her self-confidence from her childhood because Nana has abused her orally, and her husband now abuses her physically.

Later in the book, the story is carried over to revolve around Leila, an intelligent, educated, and young girl whose father is a teacher. She has a powerful drive to finish her education. Blond of hair and green of eyes, she represents the educated Afghan women. Leila falls in love with Tariq at fifteen, and they have a secret affair, but due to war and sanctions, Tariq travels to another city. In the following months, Leila discovers that Tariq has died in an accident. Soon, her parents are also deceased. Rasheed finds Leila in the rubble following the collapse of the building that has killed her parents, and drags her out from the rubble. Miriam and Rasheed nurse Leila for weeks. They both care about her health. Eventually, it is discovered that Leila is carrying Tariq's child. Rasheed wishes to marry her, and she accepts to have her child carry certain legitimacy in their taboo-driven society. She seeks security with her unborn son, and decides to marry as soon as possible to avoid scandals. At the same time, however, She has to face the fact that she is parrying a person that she does not love; she loves Tariq, but there is no other choice, as she fears facing the upcoming chapter of her life on her own.

Finally, a scene is shown to the readers where the underlying theme of dread is exposed. Miriam decides to

risk everything, consciously while doing so, and murders Rasheed to save Leila and her children, Aziza and Zelmai. While the concept of imprisonment itself is horrifying to her, her fellow inmates respect her and share with her their food. They love and support her. She finds the love and sympathy that she sought all her life in the prison, establishing an emotional framework for the readers to connect with the story. It can be interpreted that Miriam does not regret murdering Rasheed, as by doing so, she has gifted Leila and her children safety from the challenges of his abusive nature. Besides, until she is imprisoned, Leila and children were perhaps the only people who loved her truly and thoroughly. She finds what she sought all her life when she finally overcomes her fears: love (Hosseini, 2007, p. 395).

All in all, fear is recurring and irreplaceable emotion in literature, depicted in different ways by different artists as well as scholars. This chapter analyzed the concept of fear in relation with three different works of fiction from three different authors. While the authors as well as their works vary in their cultural and ideological compositions as well as their pasts, expertises, and experiences, the way they incorporate the concept of fear as a unit as well as a plot device in their works is standard in the literary context: fear, much like a shadow, is rarely a full picture of the situation; hence, the impact of fear on a person's attitude and way of life may vary from resulting in inexplicably negative impacts to finding salvation. The choice, perhaps, lies in the own hands of the person.

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