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From War to Words: Trauma, Memory, and Transformation in Hadi Al-Abdullah's *Critical Conditions: My Diary of the Syrian Revolution*

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Abstract:

This article examines Hadi Al-Abdullah's memoir *Critical Conditions: My Diary of the Syrian Revolution* (2011-2019) as an ethical trauma narrative documenting the psychological, spatial, and narrative afterlives of the Syrian uprising. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's theory of traumatic belatedness, Avishek Parui's concept of slippery memory, and John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation paradigm, the study argues that Al-Abdullah articulates trauma through delayed recognition, narrative fragmentation, material haunting, and resilience, rather than linear recollection or narrative closure. The article examines how personal testimony mediates between subjective suffering and collective memory formation by focusing on the author's experiences of injury, loss, and frontline war journalism. It further argues that the memoir transforms individual trauma into an ethical practice of witnessing that resists the authoritarian regime and contributes to peacebuilding as an ongoing relational process. The findings of this article underscore the significance of personal narratives in peacebuilding and highlight the role of storytelling in shaping collective consciousness and facilitating societal reform in post-conflict contexts.

Keywords: Syrian literature, trauma memoir, ethical witness, slippery memory, ruins, conflict transformation, peacebuilding.

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I- Introduction:

Since March 2011, the Syrian Revolution, also known as the Revolution of Dignity[1], has transformed both political structures and personal lives. Spontaneous, peaceful, and weaponless demonstrations started against the authoritarian regime, asking for freedom, justice, and dignity. It evolved into a prolonged conflict marked by humanitarian catastrophe, displacement, and widespread violence. The revolutionary people cheered slogans such as "The Syrian people will not be humiliated," "freedom," and "one, one, one, Syrians are one" (Jaradat 9). These slogans reflect the enduring spirit of resistance, dignity, and unity among Syrians during their prolonged struggle. They are not merely words; rather, they express the story of an oppressed people and a distinctive revolution.

Hadi Al-Abdullah's memoir, *Critical Conditions,* documents this era by merging frontline journalism with personal testimony. This study analyses the memoir as a trauma narrative that integrates personal and collective aspects, converting experiences of anguish into ethical testimony and socially active remembrance. The voice of the author shines as the reader goes through Al-Abdullah's hardships and how he overcame his trauma and his psychological disorders. Narrating his life story from a unique perspective plays a significant role in conveying his suffering to the world and preserving it as a historical record for future generations.

The study explores two central questions: How does Al-Abdullah's personal experience with injury, loss, and war journalism inform his understanding of trauma? and how does his memoir mediate between individual suffering and the formation of collective memory, contributing to peacebuilding? This article examines these questions through the combined frameworks of trauma theory and conflict transformation.

II- Literature Review

Research on trauma narratives has expanded over the past two decades, reflecting a growing interest in memoirs emerging from conflict zones. Scholars such as Cathy Caruth emphasise trauma's belatedness and its disruptive effects on narrative structure (Caruth 4). Avishek Parui emphasises the instability and fragmentation of traumatic memory, illustrating that individuals frequently remember experiences as emotionally charged fragments rather than in coherent sequences (Parui 2017). Within this framework, the memoir functions not only as personal testimony but also as a form of collective memory. It examines key theoretical perspectives and empirical findings related to repetition, fragmentation, language limits, and transformation to peacebuilding. By synthesising the existing research, the following reviews identify gaps that the present study aims to address.

First, Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala* (2013) exemplifies trauma shaped by systemic oppression, the destruction of her peaceful way of life, and a targeted assassination attempt for defending girls' education. While the memoir foregrounds resilience and advocacy, trauma emerges retrospectively through narration rather than being immediately understood. Education serves as a means of societal change as well as individual growth. Malala's emphasis on education and forgiveness aligns with Lederach's model of conflict transformation, presenting storytelling as a form of ethical futurity rather than closure. The trauma actually strengthens her determination rather than breaking her spirit. However, the narrative largely avoids engagement with fragmentation or materialised trauma.

Second, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007) narrates the psychological devastation of child soldiering through episodic structure, repetition, and fragmented memory. Beah's recovery encompasses rehabilitation, communal support, and narrative as a therapeutic method. It is an example of survival, showing how trauma destroys childhood

but also how inner strength and human connection provide a road back to humanity. The first-person narrative of the memoir facilitates a profound emotional connection and intimacy with Beah's inner world, including his trauma, terror, and resilience. His recollections demonstrate Parui's concept of "slippery memory," emphasising affectively charged fragments over chronological coherence. Unlike Al-Abdullah's memoir, however, Beah's account focuses on post-conflict rehabilitation rather than ongoing instability during political upheaval.

Finally, these memoirs allow for an analysis of how similar themes such as violence, oppression, and survival are treated differently across cultural contexts and individual experiences, thereby enriching the literary review beyond Al-Abdullah's single perspective. Although these testimonials demonstrate the role of trauma memoirs in fostering resilience, global awareness, and ethical contemplation, they differ from Al-Abdullah's *Critical Conditions*, which emerges amid conflict. This paper has yet to examine his memoir combining frontline journalism with trauma testimony and to analyse the role of spatial ruin and material haunting in contemporary Middle Eastern trauma literature. This study addresses that gap by situating Al-Abdullah's narrative within interdisciplinary frameworks of trauma theory, phenomenology, and conflict transformation.

III- Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study analyses trauma, memory, and the transformation from war to peace in Hadi Al-Abdullah's *Critical Conditions* through an interdisciplinary framework that integrates trauma theory, literary studies, conflict transformation, and phenomenology. A major theoretical framework to analyse trauma in Al-Abdullah's memoir is Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, which is considered the milestone in traumatic experience studies, especially her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Glaser

provides a quotation by Nasrin Olla, president of the Theory Reading Group, describing the importance of Cathy Caruth's text, which "created a language and a conceptual framework through which scholars could take seriously the role of trauma in the twentieth century." It opened up questions and avenues of inquiry that were foundational to the now-established field of trauma studies," ("Conference to focus on work of trauma scholar Cathy Caruth"). Caruth highlights how narrative structures, gaps, and silences communicate psychological injury that defies chronological representation (Caruth 4). In this study, Caruth's concepts guide close reading of Al-Abdullah's memoir, particularly in exploring narrative fragmentation, repetition, and the navigation of injury, displacement, and loss.

Building on Caruth, Avishek Parui situates trauma within historical and political contexts, emphasizing the "geographical and existential dislocation" and altered states of consciousness that arise from extreme events (Parui 73). Applying this perspective allows for understanding how the Syrian Revolution disrupted social, political, and psychic structures, producing fragmented memory and unstable identity. His methodology integrates trauma studies with phenomenology, cognitive psychology, and memory studies to examine how postcolonial literature represents the psychological processes of collective memory and forgetting.

Finally, John Paul Lederach's theory of conflict transformation situates individual trauma within broader social and relational processes. Lederach's theory complements Caruth and Parui's theory by emphasising the social trauma and the attempt to achieve peacebuilding. By his theory, he emphasises three inquiries. He emphasises the importance of understanding the present, envisioning the future, and connecting past life stories with both the present and the future. He sees conflict not as something to suppress, but as a way for growth. The theory of conflict transformation helps to explain change with the aim of directing it toward socially constructive and non-destructive outcomes. Al-Abdullah's

memoir exemplifies this approach by transforming personal suffering into testimony that contributes to social memory and the ongoing project of peacebuilding.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, emphasising narrative structure, motifs, metaphors, silences, and phenomenological markers such as ruins and spatial memory. Comparative references to memoirs such as Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala* (2013) and Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* (2007) contextualise Al-Abdullah within global trauma discourse. It highlights trauma markers such as repetition and gaps, memory, ethical witness, phenomenological shifts in perception, and ruins as peacebuilding agents; war to peace.

IV- Belated Trauma and Slippery Memory in *Critical Conditions*:

The memoir has emerged as one of the most powerful contemporary forms of writing, especially in the context of war memoirs, which offer intimate narratives that combine personal experience with historical memory. "The word 'trauma' is a Greek word which means 'wound'- the physical injuries", but this physical wound has a lasting impact on the inner psyche. As Swarna VC and Karunambigai clarify, "External events, health and social structures like natural calamities, famines, oppression, slavery, poverty, social neglect, physical and mental abuse, epidemics and pandemics, death and war have transformed the meaning of trauma from physical injury to the internal wound of the psyche. (Dunham, 2024)" (Swarna VC and Karunambigai 171). Therefore, trauma is not just "what happened," but how one experiences, remembers, integrates, or fails to integrate it. This formulation highlights the lasting trauma that exists in memory; it is felt both in the moment and repeatedly revisited long afterward, demanding ongoing interpretation and integration.

The repetition in memoirs functions as both a stylistic and an ethical strategy in *Critical Conditions*, shaping the memoir's rhythm and its moral resonance. Scenes of bombardment, fight, and documentation recur with minimal variation, producing a narrative pattern that mirrors the compulsive nature of trauma and the demands of ethical witness. Based on Caruth's concept of repetition compulsion and Parui's study of memory retrieval, the recurring episodes show the psychological effects of trauma as well as a deliberate attempt to document and acknowledge violent experiences. Repetition, thus, operates simultaneously as symptom and ethical strategy. It signals unprocessed experience while reinforcing the memoir's intervention in collective memory.

Al-Abdullah recounts moments of extreme danger, bombings, arrests, and injuries, aiming to document the harrowing realities of life under the Syrian authoritarianism and the subsequent refugee journey from 2011 to 2019. His emotional comprehension unfolds gradually, often only when he is far from the conflict places. For example, his injury that happened in Aleppo and recovery in Turkey likely involved a delay in fully understanding or integrating what had happened. Its formation is shaped through exile in fragmented and repetitive memoir passages. Al-Abdulla's statement that he "still to this day has not been able to process the enormity of the events" (13) shows this late recognition. Although the events took place long time ago, their emotional and psychological effects continue to unfold. However, the full psychological and ethical significance of this event emerges gradually across multiple recounted experiences, illustrating trauma as an experience that resists immediate understanding.

Al-Abdullah frequently describes running toward danger rather than away from it, documenting suffering in real time: "We ran with every barrel" (138). In an attempt to gain international attention, he remembers filming civilians. The paradox of trauma in the testimony is emphasised by each repetition of these scenes. This paradox lies in the

fact that he both shapes the story for more general ethical goals and survives through repeated exposure to danger. Repeated exposure to danger turns personal trauma into an act of collective witnessing, resisting both the authoritarian regime and international apathy. In contrast to Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, episodic recollection highlights survivors' moral obligations to testify and defy strict authoritarian regulations, and maintain a moral claim on memory. In both memoirs, repetition conveys the persistence of violence, the limits of comprehension, and the moral imperative to record, share, and preserve memory for others.

Furthermore, as a direct representation of the structure of trauma under the authority of organised violence, Al-Abdullah says, "But the regime was threatening activists with their families and arresting girls as hostages until the wanted men surrendered themselves," (47). The threat to one's family transfers the danger from the individual to their close ones, thus expanding the scope of the trauma to include their emotional bonds. Caruth clarifies that trauma is not experienced merely as a physical event, but as a breach of the fundamental structure of security. Al-Abdullah adds, "The prison cells swallow them up" (47); he means 'the arrested people' by the pronoun 'them'. The cells in this quotation are not only places that confine people; rather, they "swallow," erasing their traces and stopping time, which is consistent with the idea of trauma as a break in human narrative. He also says that "the nightmares intensified that someone might hurt them" (47), which directly points to the logic of compulsive repetition that Caruth describes; one sign of the traumatic event's involuntary recurrence is an awake nightmare. This indicates that scarring events are not limited to the self but also affect others, turning trauma into a network of ongoing concern rather than a singular incident. The intense representation of existential shock and the limits of perception in the face of approaching destruction is clear as he provides, "I knew at that moment how one anticipates death moments before, and I surrendered myself to the end, as its door had been flung wide open," (51). From Cathy Caruth's perspective, trauma is a moment when

the sense of normal time breaks down, and the event becomes too large for the human mind to process. Anticipating one's own death represents what could be described as the limit of human experience, as the self-confronts its end. This confrontation also involves a rapid, acute flash of consciousness, similar to a shocking realisation. In addition to the passive resignation, his statement, "I surrendered myself to the end," also raises the possibility of a psychological dissociation; the ego appears to be both conscious of and accepting death at the same time, as though standing both inside and outside of it. That is what Caruth identifies, explaining that trauma is an experience that puts the person in contact with something outside of their representation, rupturing the boundary between perception and event. This division in the self's position is consistent with this idea.

Moreover, Al-Abdullah provides that "Death was beckoning to me from all directions. It was a journey fraught with death, in which there was everything but him" (52). In this statement, there is a sense of a complete encirclement and the vanishing of any hope of escape or survival, which intensifies the experience of being at the point of death with destruction. Here, death functions as a pervasive presence rather than a particular event. In the final sentence, a striking semantic paradox emerges: death is present as a complete encirclement and absent as an actual realisation. When death is present as an absolute danger but not yet realised, it creates a suspended tension between life and destruction; a temporal space where the self exists on the edge of death. This paradox fully captures the traumatic structure.

Trauma, as an internal wound, cannot be fully healed, according to Caruth. This idea is clearly expressed by Al-Abdullah, "Pains that are quiet then erupt, and wounds that remain no matter how many cosmetic surgeons I bring in. The real wound does not heal... it remains here, inside the heart" (54). According to Cathy Caruth, trauma produces recurrent effects that "the survivor enters the realm which is nearer to death," (Kaur 5),

rather than just as a continuous pain. This transition between latency and explosion captures the essence of delayed trauma, which, as Caruth clarifies, is not present all the time but instead it manifests itself suddenly at random times, such as in nightmares and flashbacks. In the expression "the real wound," the idea of a "trace" is thus associated with trauma; the scar is not the wound itself, but rather a trace of something that has not fully disappeared. The effort to "bring in cosmetic surgeons" reflects a desire to remove the body's external wound, or return it to its natural state. However, the statement highlights that the real wound is internal rather than external: "It remains here, inside the heart." This transition from the outside to the interior illustrates the distinction between addressing the event's external appearance and the inability to fully eradicate its psychological effects. Because the trauma here is embedded in the structure of feeling and memory as well as the physical world, it resists healing.

In addition, according to Caruth, trauma lies not only in fear or pain but also in a feeling of helplessness when facing an event that exceeds one's ability to comprehend. In this context, Al-Abdullah says, "All I could do was crying over my helplessness and sealing it as a new sorrow in my heart," (61). This expression creates a sensation of helplessness, which is a key component of the traumatic experience, in which the person believes they have no control over the incident. Here, crying is an act of accepting failure rather than just expressing sorrow. His statement, "seal it as a new sorrow in my heart," carries profound meaning: Helplessness is not temporary; rather, it is engraved or imprinted and leaves a permanent impression. As if every instance of powerlessness adds a new seal to the inner memory, the act of "sealing" spoke to continuity and permanence. According to Caruth, trauma is an enduring mark that is re-registered in the mind with every recurrence of the powerlessness or loss.

Additionally, Avishek Parui interprets powerlessness as the result of an oppressive political environment that denies individuals free will and personal agency, thereby producing a collective memory of betrayal or repression. In this instance, helplessness is manifested not as a fleeting weakness but rather as a fresh mark etched into emotional memory, intensifying the sensation of brokenness that has built up over time.

V- Spatialising Trauma: Ruins, Haunting, and Material Memory:

Trauma in *Critical Conditions* is not only temporally delayed but materially inscribed in the landscape of war. Drawing on Dylan Trigg, ruins function as repositories of memory, articulating both discontinuity and persistent presence (Trigg 1). Al-Abdullah's detailed descriptions of bombed neighbourhoods, destroyed hospitals, and deserted streets transform space into an ethical witness, linking personal suffering with collective histories of violence. These material sites are more than mere backdrops; they participate actively in the narrative, bearing traces of trauma while offering frameworks for reflection and ethical response.

The memoir's emphasis on space is a reflection of Zuzanna Dziuban's idea of memory as a ghostly presence, in which damaged urban settings act as haunting sites that reveal contested or suppressed histories (Dziuban 122). Cities such as Al-Qusayr are significant examples of this method; the destroyed buildings represent layers of protest, displacement, and bloodshed, at the same time bearing witness to the past and influencing the present. In addition to highlighting relationship ethics, the memory of killed colleagues, such as Trad al-Zuhouri and Khaled Issa, forces the narrator and reader to recognise the long-lasting effects of violence by transforming their absence into a continuing moral obligation. Thus, the human experience, material destruction, and ethical responsibility are

all connected by a spatialised trauma in *Critical Conditions*, illustrating how memory and location intertwine during the conflict.

The expression of pain occurs in that "no one knows how much it hurts until the term becomes reality and the meaning moves from the term to reality. The roof of the house fell on her and the two children as if it were the sky, and the earth became narrow for them as if deficiency had invaded the house," (Al-Abdullah 69). According to Cathy Caruth, the breach between symbol and reality reveals the shock. This reversal illustrates the heart of the traumatic experience: what begins as an image or a warning becomes a painful and actual event. The phrase "meaning moves from the term to reality" refers to the concept's transition from abstraction to manifestation; in particular, words like "war," "bombing," and "destruction" become concrete sensory experiences. Thus, "These atrocities may seem physical at the surface level, but they often leave a deep psychological imprint on the mind, leading to trauma" (Kaur 1). Here, Caruth's idea of trauma as an event that invades consciousness and that language cannot fully comprehend becomes evident. The subsequent scene, "The roof of the house collapsed… and the earth felt too small for them," (Al-Abdullah 69) evokes dramatic imagery that reflects the pervasive danger.

The roof's fall "like the sky" signifies the failure of ultimate protection, while "the earth felt too small for them" conveys the total obstruction of any means of escape. "The meaning moves from term to reality" (Al-Abdullah 69) can be understood, according to Avishek Parui, as a transition from abstract political discourse to a tangible collective experience in which the language of politics or the media becomes a violent reality experienced by the community. However, the narrative emphasises individual realisation and sensory collapse, aligning it more closely with Caruth's description of the traumatic structure. Trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, "seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche" (Caruth 4). In this instance, the narrator's words,

"Dawn had broken, folding away one of the worst nights of my life" (Al-Abdullah 85), do not denote the cessation of pain but rather its passage from the event's shadow into a light that exposes its traces. Here, dawn carries the night inside itself, yet it does not completely remove it; rather, it folds it away.

VII- Fragmented Narrative and the Limits of Language:

Narrative fragmentation is a defining feature of *Critical Conditions*, reflecting the disruption of memory, perception, and affect that results from sustained exposure to extreme violence. Episodes shift abruptly between reportage, reflection, and commentary, resisting linear storytelling and chronological coherence. In life-threatening situations, like the bombings in Aleppo, temporal collapse is especially noticeable as panic and physical sensation and moral urgency (145). Fragmentation here mirrors both the instability of memory and the limits of comprehension under duress. Here, the analysis examines Arabic expressions translated into English, given that Arabic is Al-Abdullah's native language. Caruth mentions that the man who told the story of Hiroshima uses their native language, "the story told by the Japanese man, spoken in a language native to him but new to the film and foreign to the French woman as well as to most of the audience at whom the film is aimed," (43). Writing in the native language allows the author to express emotions more freely, without linguistic constraints. In the following paragraphs, the language is analysed as traumatic, as it consists mostly of metaphors and reveals the deep traumatic pain of the author's psyche.

Parui's concept of slippery memory illuminates the inherent instability of recollection in the memoir. Memories return as emotionally concentrated fragments, images of barrel bombs, destruction, and bloodied faces, while contextual details change or differ (Parui 84). This fragmentation highlights how trauma disrupts both temporal and narrative

continuity, producing recollections that are vivid yet incomplete. Al-Abdullah explicitly recognises this tension: “Life is sometimes linear… but at other times it is so full of events that words end up narrating it, but the events do not” (13). The statement involves the ethical and cognitive complexity of living through war. It explains experiences exceed linguistic and mnemonic frameworks, leaving gaps in narrative representation.

Trauma puts language itself under strain. Caruth emphasises that trauma exceeds linguistic representation, making narration both necessary and inadequate. In response, Al-Abdullah employs metaphor, imagery, and episodic repetition to approximate affective and ethical truths: “The last drops of water in a thirsty man’s jar are what hurt him most” (13). Such language condenses vulnerability, moral urgency, and emotional intensity into symbolic expression, allowing readers to grasp what cannot be directly articulated. In this way, language in the memoir does not offer closure; rather, it serves as a temporary vessel for experience, preserving the ethical responsibility of witnessing and encouraging readers to encounter trauma as an ongoing and relational process. Trauma in *Critical Conditions* thus exemplifies Caruth’s argument that psychic injury is never fully present at the moment of occurrence and remains unresolved even after political or social rupture, emphasising the belated and ongoing nature of wartime trauma.

The metaphor further reflects a key idea in Caruth’s theory: trauma is not recovered as a stable memory, but is linguistically displaced, emerging instead through oblique images that veil violence rather than naming it directly. Language thus becomes not merely a medium for conveying trauma, but the very site where trauma manifests itself. The third idea emerges through the circular temporal structure the narrator explicitly acknowledges, “I was moving in an encircle, almost losing its end to its beginning each time,” (Al-Abdullah 69). Here, the past no longer appears as a completed event; instead, it persists in the present through compulsive repetition, blurring the distinction between beginning and end and

revealing a collapse of linear temporality. For Caruth, such circularity does not reflect a conscious attempt to recall or recover the past; rather, it signals that the trauma remains unassimilated. Narrative, in this sense, does not move toward closure but instead exposes the persistence of trauma as an open wound, inscribed in both memory and language.

The language in "Al-Qusair: a word that involved pain? A homeland? Life! Memories... and the drains obstruct their faces," (Al-Abdullah 64), serves as a tool for its embodiment rather than just a medium for shock. It is a clear representation of Cathy Caruth's concept of language and the limits of representation and Avishek Parui's concept of the name as a repository of collective memory. The word "Al-Qusair", which is a place, stands alone as an independent entity, followed by a series of fragmented questions: "Pain? Homeland? Life!" This interrogative fragmentation reflects a stumbling block in naming. It seems that the language is trying to grasp meaning but hesitates between multiple possibilities. This hesitation reflects what Caruth identifies as the limits of language in confronting a shocking event; the place is no longer merely a geographical designation but becomes an emotionally charged site that resists easy categorization.

In addition, the multiplicity of question and exclamation marks reflects an anxiety arising from uncertainty, that is, a breakdown of the stable relationship between the signifier "Al-Qusayr" and its signified. According to Avishek Parui, "Al-Qusayr", as a name of a place, functions not merely as a geographical reference, but as a historical sign accompanied by collective memory. When asked, is it "pain, homeland, or life?" It suggests that the location has become a symbol of shared identity, condensed into a single term. From Parui's point of view, this is an illustration of how violently impacted locations become symbolic of a past of suffering. The blockage of the routes of "memory" reveals a limit of language; that is, suppression or the burden of loss prevents communal memory from being freely expressed in public.

Also, in his expression "Our suppressed discussions," (Al-Abdullah 15), trauma disrupts the connection between an event and language, resulting in discontinuity, repetition, and semantic emptiness. Here, a semantic tension arises: discussion presupposes exchange and openness, whereas repression presupposes silence. This internal contradiction illustrates what Caruth describes as a failure of representation; speech remains grammatically present but conceptually ineffective. The plural phrase "our discussions" indicates recurrence, a fundamental aspect of Caruth's understanding of trauma as an incessant and obsessive return. Thus, the linguistic structure itself becomes a trace of trauma; speech present in form, absent in sound.

In Parui's view, the phrase attains a pragmatic and communal dimension. A collective identity is indicated by the pronoun "us" in "our discussions"; language creates a shared self with a collective memory. The adjective "suppressed," however, turns this group into an entity that speaks inside a closed space. There is an implicit authority that suppresses discourse without naming it. This active absence resonates with Parui's interpretation of silence as shaped by historical and political forces that exert pressure on collective memory. Moreover, the juxtaposition of "discussions" and "suppressed" generates a pragmatic paradox. That is, it reveals a division between the private and public spheres; between the memory circulating within the group and the history not publicly acknowledged. Here, language itself becomes a site of conflict between discovery and suppression.

The image of "an entire city crawling out of its skin" evokes a condition of existential dislocation; the skin functions as a protective boundary of identity and security, and emerging from it suggests the fragmentation of collective existence. This metaphor aligns with Caruth's conception of trauma as an experience that disrupts continuity and destabilises the sense of self. Similar to how hunger and thirst "on its fringes" suggest that the physical

and psychological effects persist after the incident, it is as though the trauma transforms from a momentary experience into a chronic condition.

On the other hand, Avishek Parui asserts that discourse in contexts of violence "reconfigures the relationship between body and place, and gives space a moral and political dimension." In the passage, the city transforms into a body "creeping out of its skin", and then the land transforms into a speaking self; "As if the land were saying, 'Return, for you have no home but me.'" Geography is given a voice through this depiction, becoming a metaphorical mother yelling to her offspring. Language serves to reaffirm belonging in this context; place continues to serve as the identification reference point even during times of starvation and exile. As if the city were coughing up its yearning, the image "like a cough of longing" accentuates this sensation; longing is not a silent emotion but rather a sporadic bodily ache. In this way, in addition to describing separation, the book also develops a symbolic discourse of return that defies uprooting.

Besides, as an expression of the suppression that the people in Syria suffered from, that suppression was like a 'volcano' as Al-Abdullah describes, "The volcano, after its heart had been boiling for so long, had to erupt," (21). According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is marked by delay and recurrence. The event is not fully absorbed in the moment but persists as a latent force within the self, later resurfacing in an uncontrollable and obsessive manner. In this context, the "volcano" image symbolises a psyche carrying an unprocessed event, while the phrase "his heart boiled for a long time" suggests a prolonged period of internal containment before release. This interpretation is comparable to Caruth's description of trauma as an experience that 'inhabits' the self and then resurfaces as an involuntary impulse. According to Avishek Parui, the volcano represents a community or communal memory repressed by historical or political trauma. While the 'explosion' might represent the moment when memory comes to the surface, whether through protest, counter-discourse,

or the resuscitation of a suppressed narrative, the phrase "heart had been boiling for so long" alludes to the accumulation of marginalised tales or unacknowledged sorrow.

VIII- Conflict Transformation and Ethical Futurity:

Whereas trauma theory foregrounds rupture, belatedness, and the limitations of memory, John Paul Lederach's conflict transformation framework provides a complementary perspective for interpreting how *Critical Conditions* by Al-Abdullah imagines ethical futures within conditions of ongoing instability. Lederach places individual experiences of suffering within wider social dynamics, contending that conflict should not be understood solely as a problem to be solved but as a potential catalyst for constructive transformation that reduces violence and promotes relational justice (Lederach 16). Transformation, in this sense, involves recognising the interdependence of personal and collective narratives and cultivating pathways toward societal regeneration.

Through both action and storytelling, Al-Abdullah exemplifies these ideas in *Critical Conditions.* Even under severe threat, his decision to document brutality on the front lines reflects a conscious ethical commitment to accountability and bearing witness. The memoir emphasises that witnessing is an active intervention rather than a passive act, as illustrated by the statement, "I used my camera as my only tool to force the world to recognise us, not as a weapon" (112). Testimony serves as both resistance and relational labour in this context, fostering group contemplation and possible reconciliation. The memoir turns episodic suffering into a tool for comprehending larger social upheavals and envisioning positive futures by documenting events as they happen.

Al-Abdullah's memoir also uses narrative self-fashioning to enact ethical futurity. The use of pseudonyms in both psychological and political contexts reflects resilience, deliberate control of identity, and symbolic reinvention. Al-Abdullah maintains ethical

continuity while negotiating existence under totalitarian scrutiny by murdering one identity in order to regain another. This process of narrative self-reconstruction reflects Lederach's view that transformation involves both acknowledging wrongdoing and envisioning alternative ways of acting. Consequently, memory, witnessing, and selfhood emerge as interconnected instruments of ethical practice, linking individual survival to collective accountability. The memoir further situates conflict transformation within temporal and relational networks. Rather than presenting peace as a completed state, Al-Abdullah emphasises its ongoing, provisional character. Even following the collapse of the Assad regime, trauma endures, ethical responsibilities persist, and the process of reconstruction remains unfinished. The text demonstrates how individual narrative labour, through documentation, reflection, and testimony, can generate relational bonds, cultivate social awareness, and establish frameworks for justice in post-conflict societies. In this way, the memoir exemplifies Lederach's principle that transformation is less a static endpoint than a continuous process, shaped by ethical engagement and sustained vigilance.

Comparative reflections reinforce the broader significance of Al-Abdullah's approach. Similar to *I Am Malala*, where personal adversity is reframed as a global ethical appeal, and A Long Way Gone, which presents rehabilitation as a relational and communal process, *Critical Conditions* demonstrates how trauma memoirs can operate as mechanisms of social repair. However, Al-Abdullah's work is distinctive in its attention to active witnessing under ongoing conflict, emphasizing that ethical responsibility extends beyond surviving personal trauma to documenting, interpreting, and shaping collective memory for the wider community. Storytelling becomes an essential mechanism for peacebuilding: it acknowledges persistent injustice while imagining futures grounded in ethical action, accountability, and relational repair.

Furthermore, in light of John Paul Lederach's concept of peacebuilding and relational transformation after conflict, the following quotation expresses strong hope for the future. Al-Abdullah says, "Every person's path is predetermined, and their struggle is inseparable from their own strength... No matter how much sadness and longing rage, and no matter how much we suffer from loss and separation, sweet memories remain a source of strength to endure the hardships of the journey..." (173). Lederach contends that societies emerging from violence recover not only through political settlements but also through the reconstruction of their relational and symbolic fabric. This perspective rests on the understanding that individuals do not exist in isolation but as participants in an intricate web of relationships, with their struggles and destinies intertwined within this network.

Here, the statement "their struggle is inseparable from their own strength" might be understood as a confirmation of personal accountability in a group setting; the struggle a moral commitment deeply embedded in both bodily experience and action rather than a transient incident. There is a connection between the idea that "sweet memories are a beacon" and what Lederach refers to as moral imagination, or the capacity to discern the possibility of life amid the debris. Memory serves as a symbolic resource that gives the self the willpower to endure in this situation, rather than just retrieving the past. Since peace is not founded on forgetting but rather on turning suffering into purpose, Lederach highlights the need for narratives that uphold dignity and provide hope to suffering cultures.

Finally, Lederach's framework allows us to see *Critical Conditions* as more than a record of personal suffering. The memoir presents a vision of an ethical future in which trauma is transformed into practical insight rather than being erased. Al-Abdullah shows how literary witness can uphold relational ethics, preserve disputed histories, and actively contribute to the ongoing work of peacebuilding by connecting delayed personal experience to collective accountability and social reconstruction. Trauma and testimony, in this context,

become inseparable from the labour of imagining and creating a just and resilient post-conflict society.

IX- Conclusion:

Utilising Caruth's trauma theory, Avishek Parui's theory of trauma and memory, and Lederach's conflict transformation paradigm to analyse Syrian memoirs demonstrates how personal narratives serve as a mechanism for resistance in pursuit of peacebuilding. Al-Abdullah illustrates that, despite violence and displacement, storytelling may facilitate relational, cultural, and structural transformation. Their works illustrate that conflict transformation is an ongoing process based on memory, storytelling, and the imagination of potential futures rather than a distant goal. The experience of trauma is democratised by the conversion of brief journalistic reports into enduring memoirs, shifting from isolated firsthand accounts, such as the broken ruins of Al-Qusayr, to collective social healing. Through shared storytelling, Caruth's unclaimed traumatic events find expression; Parui's hauntology weaves them into enduring cultural echoes; and Lederach's relational approach transforms ghostly bonds with the fallen into grassroots visions of renewal, directly challenging the Assad regime's isolation with coherent tales of human dignity.

As a Syrian who lived in Syria (from 2011 to 2023) during the revolution that ended in 2024, this change reshapes how the reader connects with traumatic events. It links big ideas from books to real shared feelings in communities. Reading these memoirs shifts an external perspective into deep personal involvement, shaped by Al-Abdullah's witness symbols and representations of fear and ruins, which render collective pain immediate and tangible. This transformation shifts the reader from a passive observer into an engaged and caring participant, committed to building a more peaceful society in which memories compel action rather than mere reflection. However, a single article is insufficient to cover

all aspects of trauma and transformation. A further article will examine this text in depth, focusing on how Al-Abdullah, in a subsequent work, reconceptualises futurity as a continuation of memory work rather than a rupture from trauma.

Notes:

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1. It started by defending the people's dignity. After two teenagers wrote "It is your turn, Doctor," referring to Bashar Al-Assad, they were arrested and tortured by the intelligence forces, and then their fathers were humiliated by their wives. In the Syrian culture, it is a huge fault to humiliate someone by a woman's dignity. That is why it is called the Revolution of Dignity (Al-Abdullah 17-18).

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