

War Trauma as Reflected in the Stone of Laughter by Hoda Barakat

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Abstract:

The Stone of Laughter is a famous novel written by Hoda Barakat (b. 1952), one of the most influential novelists of the present Arab literary scenario. This is a daring and provocative novel, full of dark humor and astute observations about the people and way of life in war-torn Beirut, Lebanon. It is one of the best novels set against the backdrop of the Lebanese Civil War (1952-1990). It narrates the struggle of common people during the war period. At the time of its initial publication, *The Stone of Laughter* shocked Arab readers' stereotypes about women writers because it was written with such delicate expression and without any hint of sentimentality or any political propaganda. The author has depicted the broad themes masterfully in this amazing novel such as existence, love, passion, identity, displacement, addiction etc. Actually, this novel is a mixer of thoughts like solitude, degradation of humanity and psychological affect as well. The author Hoda Barakat has portrayed the trauma of war in a very clear and vivid way in this novel which became the recipient of the prestigious *Al-Naqid* Award in 1990.

Keywords: civil war, displacement, humanity, passion, trauma.

Introduction: A renowned Lebanese-born novelist and one of the most original voices in modern Arabic literature, Hoda Barakat lived in the war, the Lebanese Civil War. She has experienced and witnessed the Lebanese civil war and all the traumas that the war left for her country and its people. Her books are filled with elegant narrative that boldly and vividly chronicles the battle, holding the reader's attention until the very end. *The Stone of Laughter* is a malicious novel of thriller war stories. Her works are well considered as wonderful introduction to the world of contemporary Arabic literature. In 1952 Barakat was born into a Maronite family of Beirut city. During the civil war she lived in Beirut and later moved to Paris where she presently resides and is working as a journalist there. In her novel, Barakat has tried to display a lot of sufferings that the common people were experiencing during that brutal war. Her literary pieces which were written during and after the Lebanese civil war, always focus on the civil war as a background for her writings as, she was a survivor and observer of Lebanon's Civil war. Her narratives depict a Lebanon that is ravaged completely by the civil war and sectarian division. The chaos and upheaval of war have a profound psychological impact on the characters in her works. Barakat wrote six fictional narratives such as *Hajar al-Dahik* (The Stone of Laughter) which is her first novel, *Harith al-Miyah* (The Tiller of Waters), *Bareed al-Lail* (Voices of the Lost), *Mulukat fi al-Ard* (The Kingdom of this Earth), *Sayyidi wa Habibi* (My Master and My Love) and *Ahl al-Hawa* (Disciples of Passion). Almost all these novels are composed on the background of civil war. She has also written one memoir *Rasa'il al-Ghariba* (Letters of the Stranger) and one collection of short-stories namely *Za'irat* (Women Visitors).

Area of Research: The area of Research of this paper is a contemporary Arabic novel *The Stone of Laughter* and the prominent Middle Eastern novelist Hoda Barakat who is often considered as one of the most origin female voices throughout the Arab literary world, against the backdrops of war and its violence.

Objective: This article would focus on the following objectives:

- To trace war narrative in contemporary Arabic literature.
- To trace the Lebanese Civil War and its chaos and traumas.
- To trace the historical importance laid behind these war novels.

Methodology: This article is mainly based on descriptive and analytical study method. Both the primary and secondary sources are consulted for preparing this article. Regarding the primary sources the original book written by Hoda Barakat is consulted. And books by other authors, journals are consulted as secondary sources.

Discussion: *The Stone of Laughter* which is written by the contemporary Arab author Hoda Barakat, contains the war in it. The Lebanese civil war is the background of this thriller novel. Barakat has depicted very skillfully the trauma of civil war and also the state of social instability here, as, the trauma of war has been one of the major themes in the war literature in the postcolonial period. Barakat has been considered as one of the most important contemporary female voices against war in Arabic literature. In her debut novel *The Stone of Laughter*, she has presented the tragedy and terrible experiences that are lived by the characters of the novels. It revolves around the characters whose lives are represented by the conflict and its repercussions. Notably, this novel was the very first book by an Arab author to have a main character who is homosexual.

Lebanese Civil War: The Lebanese civil war was a multifaceted war which had took place in 13th April, 1975 and continued till 13th October, 1990. It is often observed as the main theme in almost all the novels of Hoda Barakat, including *The Stone of Laughter*. This civil war in Lebanon resulted in huge mortality and emigration as well. Due to this civil war, millions of Lebanese common people had to leave their residential country with the intention to get settlement elsewhere permanently. The Lebanese civil war was an active part of the Arab cold war, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Iran-Israel proxy conflict. Lebanon was totally devastated with this civil war.

The Stone of Laughter: *The Stone of Laughter* is a fractured narrative which is woven around a gay man, Khalil. It was written in Arabic as *Hajar al-Dahik* and was published in 1990 by *Riad El-Rayyes* Books, London and translated into English by Sophie Bennet in 1995. *The Stone of Laughter* is one of the most famous novels in the postcolonial era which boldly displays the civil war in Lebanon which lasted for nearly two decades. This novel is not like a traditional novel as it depicts the horror and ruin and the impacts of the brutal civil war on common individuals and society as well.

The 1975 Lebanon Civil War serves as the basis for this novel's plot. The protagonist Khalil and his friend Naji go to his place to have a conversation at the start of the story. Khalil is romantically drawn to Naji since he is frequently observed covertly admiring him. The story unfolded as they moved through Beirut's streets, revealing the situation there. Individuals are fleeing Beirut with the intention of never returning.

The next chapter begins with Khalil cleaning his apartment ritualistically, as he always does after being stopped from fighting in the streets. After Naji decides to leave the city with his mother, Khalil visits Naji's abandoned home, recalling memories from the past, and Naji is meant to visit Khalil, but he doesn't show up. After a long anticipation, Khalil chooses to see his other friend Nayif, who is active in a political party. Then, close to a market that Khalil used to frequently visit, there takes place another car bombing. Subsequently, Khalil goes to Naji's residence and answers the ringing phone. It's Naji's sister who tells Khalil of Naji's passing. Khalil could not take this grief. At that time the 1982 Israeli-Lebanese conflict was going on. Everywhere bombing took place. And after the bombing ceased, Khalil made his way back to his flat from the hiding location via routes destroyed by the fighting.

Khalil changed himself after Naji passed away. He spent the entire day sleeping and made him isolated from everyone. Once more, there is a bombing, and Khalil and the others flee to a secure location to avoid the street fighting. The fighting stops after a few days, and they venture outside to observe the abandoned buildings and surrounding apartments. After fleeing their home village, Khalil's uncle and his family arrive in Beirut, where Khalil places them in Naji's flat. And Khalil's cousin sister Zahrah has a crush on Khalil but Khalil has a crush on her brother Youssef.

The story of the novel continues by describing Khalil's personal battle to become accepted by society and develop his political opinions. Youssef and Khalil are in the same struggle. Subsequently, Youssef started a new work, which has limited time for Khalil. After experiencing anxiety over this, Khalil chooses to accept Nayif's employment offer, but he misbehaves. Once more, the intermittent street violence breaks out, and Youssef is slain in it. Khalil is shocked again by Youssef's passing. He falls ill and isolates from society to the same extent that he did following Naji's passing. Later, after noticing Naji's apartment, Khalil made the decision to rent it out because it brought the memories of Naji and Youssef back.

At a party with friends of Nayif, Khalil gets acquainted with the Brother, a person who is involved in the newspaper of Nayif and also a leader of a military organization. He suspects that Khalil is a gay and later he became confirmed. The Brother invited him on the business dealings of drugs and weapon and on the way back to his apartment, Khalil was accidentally assaulted by the Brother's men, who later apologizes. Khalil now referred to as "Mr. Khalil" by his neighbor Mustafa is talking about keeping the weapons he has brought in the apartments. But the lady who is his tenant, complains that it is dangerous and he tells her to go to her apartment and that he will come there for talking. He then goes up and rapes her.

In this way the author Hoda Barakat explains how the protagonist Khalil, in due course of time, has changed from how he was to "a person who laughs". Here Khalil is an example and a micro-image of all the Lebanese people who got affected severely by the civil war.

.Trauma of the civil war as described in *The Stone of Laughter*: As it is observed in the novel *The Stone of Laughter*, the civil war resulted in various trauma in the common people. It compelled the protagonist Khalil to leave his peaceful life and leave in an isolated and homeless situation. This isolation is a disappointment in the case of Khalil and this separation moves away from humanity. Isolation is one of the bad effects from the civil war in Arabic communities. This isolation in Beirut during the brutal civil war is similar to living in exile.

Psychological traumas are also visible here in this novel. Every day the characters have to face so terrible and traumatic experiences. Violence and death were near to every common people lived during that brutal war. They have to lose their own residences and escape to some other places while they take refuge to the past memory of their family, friend and loved ones. Their hometown became neglected and totally

abandoned. The war affected Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon severely. The fire and violence of the civil war collapsed it and turned it into a Ghosts town. Everything has been destroyed by the war. People had to adjust new life between destruction and stray dogs. Brutal war and the new colonizer war ravaged their homeland. All the characters in the novel are seen to be suffered personal loss and pain, whether, crisis of existence was a big trauma for them. *The Stone of Laughter* displays the complicated sexual life of the protagonist Khalil who often has to struggle for the social acceptance. As a gay, he becomes attracted to two of his nearby fellows, but the brutal war snatched both of them away from Khalil. This is a severe attack on the feelings of him and he becomes mentally devastated and weak and further this leads to his physical loss.

During the civil war in Lebanon, its people were exposed to so many different traumatic events. These horrible events developed mental health issues like anxiety, depression, poorer life etc. in the common people. The violence and conflicts separated the families and communities also, as it is vividly portrayed in *The Stone of Laughter* by Hoda Barakat. Killing, destruction, displacement along with the alienated, sidelined protagonists appear again and again in her work.

Historical importance: *The Stone of Laughter* may be considered as a narrative with historical importance as it often discloses several facts regarding the colonialism in the middle east. It also, is a powerful narrative which brings forth the contradictory history of a city under the war through the life and dilemmas of a gay man. Above all these, this novel carries the record of the very first novel in the Arab literary world, written by a female author where the main character is a gay man.

Conclusion: It is beyond doubt that war and violence have terrific and awful outcomes everywhere. In the novel *The Stone of Laughter*, the author Hoda Barakat has portrayed the trauma of civil war which is a tragic result of the war. War always leaves painful memory on its ending. In a war affected area the lives of common people are often marginalized to certain extent. Force displacement, refugee, permanent emigration, factors circumstances, struggle for social acceptance and so many other factors are there which may cause severe trauma on the common people. They have to face such a situation where they try hard to pass the trauma and consider a secured future for them. Thus, the author Hoda Barakat has displayed the war devastated Beirut city, Lebanon. It is also an attempt from the protagonist for surviving in his isolation in which his life is reduced to a pathetic existence. Again, the theme of nostalgia, regret, deprivation, uncertainty, degradation or dislocation are also well portrayed in the Stone of laughter. So, it may be considered as a live reflection of terrible human experiences during the war period. Following the life of Khalil, the solitary gay man surviving in the devastated Beirut city, many of whose friends, relatives are killed by bombing and attacking around him, this narrative really emphasizes upon the dangers of nationalism to Arab communities. But, in the end the laughter of the protagonist seems like an ideal remedy to the ruin and ravage that nationalism brings along.

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