

WAR TRAUMA AND PERSONAL NARRATIVE IN “19 WOMEN: TALES OF RESILIENCE FROM SYRIA”

Serhii Rybalkin

Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor at the Department of Eastern and Slavic Philology,
Kyiv National Linguistic University, Ukraine
e-mail: serhii.rybalkin@knl.u.edu.ua, orcid.org/0000-0002-0194-9395

Summary

This article examines the representation of war trauma and personal narrative in Samar Yazbek's *19 Women: Tales of Resilience from Syria*, analyzing how the author combines documentary evidence with literary techniques to convey the experiences of Syrian women during the ongoing conflict. The study employs literary analysis through trauma theory and psychoanalytic approaches to investigate the narrative structure and psychological depth of women's testimonies. The research reveals how Yazbek effectively balances authenticity and artistic expression by preserving individual voices while creating a cohesive narrative that contributes to collective memory formation. The analysis demonstrates that the author's use of fragmentary narrative techniques, internal monologues, and powerful imagery reflects the psychological impact of war trauma on the protagonists. The study focuses on how the combination of autobiographical and documentary elements enhances the emotional resonance of the testimonies while maintaining their historical value. The research highlights the significance of women's war narratives in understanding the broader social and psychological consequences of military conflicts, drawing parallels with contemporary events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The article argues that Yazbek's work serves as both a literary achievement and a crucial historical document, preserving individual experiences that might otherwise be marginalized in official historical accounts. The findings emphasize the importance of personal narratives in trauma literature and their role in shaping the collective memory of war experiences when literary texts serve as tools for resilience and historical documentation.

Key words: autobiography, collective memory, documentary, narrative, trauma, war.

DOI <https://doi.org/10.23856/6721>

1. Introduction

The war in Syria, which began in 2011 and did not yet reach a final solution, has developed into a deep humanitarian crisis. The consequences of this conflict include huge losses beyond the destruction of infrastructure – firstly, an enormous negative social and psychological impact. Women – the basis for society – have suffered from violence, repression and the loss of their loved ones to be found in a whirlpool of events that have changed their lives forever. In this regard, the issue of representing female war experiences in literature is crucial for deconstructing traumatic testimonies and understanding how they affect the formation of collective memory and social change. The formulation of the problem of women's war experiences in the context of the Syrian conflict is particularly relevant since women often become invisible victims and at the same time the driving force of change in society. Women's accounts of war, violence, repression, and loss provide a space for exploring individual tragedies that have become part of a collective experience. This approach to women's war narratives builds on Cooke's

foundational work on how women's stories provide unique perspectives on war experiences that challenge traditional military narratives and highlight the complexities of civilian survival (Cooke, 1996).

The aim of the article is to highlight how Yazbek conveys the representation of war traumas using a unique combination of autobiographical and documentary elements in her "19 Women: Tales of Resilience from Syria". Focusing on linguistic means, the author conveys the psychological state of the heroines, which is key to understanding the mechanisms of the impact of war on the inner world of women. Here it is appropriate to refer to the work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub on representing trauma in literature, which emphasizes the importance of language in the transmission of extreme experience (Felman & Laub, 1992).

The relevance of studying traumatic experiences and their literary representation is even more important in the context of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which is accompanied by large-scale destruction, violence, and losses among the civilian population, including women and children. The traumatic experience of military operations, both in Syria and in Ukraine, reflects the universality of women's testimonies about the consequences of war on mental health, social identity, and collective memory (LaCapra, 2014; Herman, 2015). Representation of trauma in literature allows us to highlight individual suffering, draw attention to collective processes of recovery and understanding of tragedies. Literary narratives have become a means of transmitting these experiences, which helps society preserve and rethink collective memory (Whitlock, 2006). Through personal testimonies, such as those presented in Samar Yazbek's book "19 Women: Tales of Resilience from Syria", a broader understanding of the role of women in civil conflicts and the processes that affect post-war recovery is formed. Similarly, the representation of women's experiences during the war in Ukraine becomes important for preserving the national memory of the war and influences the awareness of the role of women in resisting aggression and rebuilding society after the conflict.

Samar Yazbek's book is an important cultural and documentary text that combines elements of fiction and documentary testimony. This makes it unique, as the author not only recreates the real stories of women who participated in the war or suffered from it but also creates a narrative that simultaneously serves as a historical document. Autobiographical elements preserved in the speech of the heroines enhance the authenticity of the testimonies, allowing the reader to immerse themselves in the deep psychological processes that occur with each woman. As Golley demonstrates through analysis of Arab women's autobiographical writing, the act of telling one's story becomes both a personal testimony and a form of cultural documentation. This dual function is particularly evident in Yazbek's work, where individual narratives collectively construct a broader historical record of the Syrian conflict (Golley, 2003a).

2. Trauma Narrative and Psychological Impact in Literary Testimonies

The heroines of Samar Yazbek's book convey their traumatic experiences through very strong images, so readers can be immersed in the psychological state of women who find themselves at the epicenter of the Syrian war. Trauma is embodied in every testimony, demonstrating how war destroys the physical and mental components of life.

The testimony of a woman who witnessed the bombing and the unbearable loss of children is eloquent. She says: "No, I have already seen many dead bodies and human remains after another massacre or shelling, but the sight of very young girls with their school bags and severed limbs was unbearable. Such pictures cannot be described in human language!"

(Yazbek, 2021: 244). This episode conveys not so much physical destruction as deep psychological trauma when a woman is forced to witness the loss of childhood and innocence. The choice of words “unbearable”, “unspeakable” emphasizes powerlessness in the face of the horrors of war.

Zein, who studied pedagogics and was 20 when the Syrian revolution launched, describes her experiences after the torture: “I bit my lips, isolating myself from the world around me and focusing on myself, trying to calm down. I wanted to disappear, to dissolve in the air!” (Yazbek, 2021: 67). This description reflects a typical reaction to extreme trauma – a dissociation when a person tries to distance him or herself from reality to protect them from pain. The psychological consequences of these events are difficult to describe, but the text attempts to convey the intensity of emotions through the images of “dissolving in the air” and “biting my lips,” which indicate oppression and isolation from the world.

Fatima from el-Quneitra talks about her experience in prison: “The prison still remains somewhere inside me. I cannot stay indoors for a long time; I walk in circles and remember my time in the prison cell. I like to be alone, loneliness no longer hurts me” (Yazbek, 2021: 233). This excerpt shows how the trauma of prison continues to haunt the heroine even after her release. Loneliness and a break with reality reflect the depressive state that accompanies a woman who has suffered from violence and torture. The prison becomes a metaphor for internal imprisonment, which cannot be overcome without external help.

Traumatic experiences are also conveyed through the eerie images of the death of loved ones. Sara from al-Mu’addamiya revives in memory: “A man’s foot in a plastic bag! So, I still have nightmares. Most often in my dreams, I see tomatoes... A few days later, my brother, his wife, and children were killed by a shell. My mother still repeats: ‘If only I had given him those tomatoes...’” (Yazbek, 2021: 27). The symbolism of tomatoes, which become associated with blood and loss, enhances the emotional impact of the narrative. Through such details, the author achieves a strong psychological effect, indicating the impossibility of avoiding feelings of guilt and pain after losses.

Daima from Damascus, who was living at Harasta when the Syrian revolution began, describes the unbearable conditions of shelling and living under constant threat of death: “We were on the verge of madness because for a long time we were forced to hide in houses, waiting for death. Over time, we got used to sleeping during shelling, and many people died without waking up” (Yazbek, 2021: 59). This episode demonstrates how constant danger and stress become commonplace for residents of conflict zones. Loss of control over one’s own life, the expectation of death becomes a habitual state that destroys people’s psyche, but this is even not the very issue: “People were besieged by Asad forces, and, beyond that, we have been under fire of Russian soldiers” (Yazbek, 2021: 242). Fatin from Duma adds: “I witnessed the bloody massacre that occurred in Duma, and the most shocking in its cruelty was 15 December 2015. Russian aviation was shelling us day and night, the bombing was not paused at night, and with the beginning of the new day, MIG jets of Syrian Airforce joined them” (Yazbek, 2021: 243). Further events of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war crimes of 2022–2024 years show that the mentioned testimonies are not literary metaphors.

Zein recounts her horrific experiences during the famine and the harsh living conditions of the war, which evoke deep emotions. She recalls how people were so emaciated that they looked *like ghosts*, and children suffered: “The children who suffered the most, who developed anaemia due to lack of food, and the mothers who fed their babies with breast milk – it disappeared because there was nothing to eat” (Yazbek, 2021: 74). This description conveys the incredible exhaustion and suffering that became a daily reality for people, especially for

mothers who saw their children die from lack of food. The narrator uses the image of “ghosts” to convey the extreme degree of exhaustion. Caruth’s concept of trauma as an unclaimed experience helps explain how such testimonies reveal both the immediate impact of violence and its delayed psychological manifestations. The way Yazbek’s heroines struggle to articulate their experiences aligns with Caruth’s theory that trauma resists simple narration while demanding to be told (*Caruth, 1996*).

Fatima shares her harrowing experience of imprisonment: “I can’t stay indoors for long; I walk in circles and remember my time in the prison cell. I like being alone, loneliness doesn’t hurt me anymore” (*Yazbek, 2021: 233*). This episode conveys the consequences of the psychological trauma that the heroine experienced in prison. The description of her loneliness and fear of being indoors reflects classic signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The narrator emphasizes that she is no longer afraid of loneliness, as the prison experience has made her emotionally alienated.

Lina Muhammad, who worked as a journalist and survived a serious injury, speaks of her altered consciousness after the battle: “Death turned out to be much easier than I imagined, it is the easiest thing that can happen to a person in life” (*Yazbek, 2021: 158–159*). This quote shows how the war affected the heroine’s attitude towards death. She stopped perceiving it as something terrible, but on the contrary – as an easy release from torment.

The traumatic experience of war in Samar Yazbek’s text deeply influences the narrative structure of her work. A key peculiarity is the fragmentary nature of the narrative, which reflects the discontinuity and chaos of the heroines’ lives during the war. Fragmentation is not a mere stylistic device – it conveys the feeling of discontinuity in the heroines’ lives. Constant shelling, loss of loved ones, torture, and exile destroy not only the heroines’ lives but also the structure of the narrative. The heroines tell about their experiences in fragments, often shifting the chronological order of events. War turns the heroines’ lives into a continuous struggle with a sense of constant danger, which leads to emotional disorientation and fragmentation of their consciousness. Fragmentation reflects the disrupted rhythm of their lives when peace and security become unattainable. The discontinuity of the narrative also emphasizes the psychological state of the heroines. They are often forced to switch between real events and internal reflections, which creates an effect of incompleteness and discontinuity. This illustrates how traumatic experiences continue to affect life even after the external threat disappears. The discontinuity and emotional tension do not allow the heroine to find peace or stability. This fragmentation of narrative reflects what Alexander describes as the social dimension of trauma, where individual psychological wounds become part of a broader cultural narrative. The discontinuity in the heroines’ stories represents not merely personal disorientation but a collective experience of social disruption (*Alexander, 2012*).

Samar Yazbek uses various linguistic devices to convey the trauma and emotional state of the heroines. An important technique is symbolism. For example, the symbol of “tomatoes” represents loss and regret, while “ghosts” convey an extreme degree of exhaustion and alienation. Through this symbolism, the reader feels the depth of trauma and suffering that cannot be conveyed through direct description alone. The author also uses metaphors to convey a state of constant fear and survival, as, for example, in the phrase: “Waiting for death”, which emphasizes the hopelessness and fear of the heroines. As Higonnet demonstrates in her analysis of women’s roles during the World Wars, the psychological impact of war creates a unique narrative perspective where personal trauma intersects with collective experience (*Higonnet, 1987*).

The psychological depth and emotional intensity of these testimonies raise a crucial methodological question: how can such profound traumatic experiences be documented while preserving their authenticity and psychological impact? Yazbek faces a dual challenge – capturing both the factual reality of events and the complex psychological states of women who experienced them. Her response to this challenge demonstrates a sophisticated balance between documentary precision and literary expression, developing a unique methodology that preserves these vital testimonies in their most authentic and powerful form.

3. Literary Authenticity: Documenting Women's Voices on War Narratives

Having examined how trauma manifests in the psychological states and narrative structures of women's testimonies, we now turn to the methodological question of how such complex experiences are documented and preserved. The challenge of maintaining authenticity while creating a coherent narrative requires specific documentary and literary approaches, which Yazbek develops throughout her work. Beverley's theory of testimonio as a form that blends personal witness with collective memory is particularly relevant to Yazbek's method. Like the testimonios Beverley analyzes, these narratives function simultaneously as individual accounts and documents of collective resistance (*Beverley, 2004*).

In "19 Women: Tales of Resilience from Syria" Samar Yazbek uses a unique combination of documentary and autobiographical elements to recreate real events through the personal stories of the characters: "I was able to conduct a conversation with fifteen heroines only via Skype, the testimonies of four of them were included in this book. When I finished the interviews in mid-2017, the task arose to retell everything I heard in the language of a novelist and writer, because that is exactly what I did when creating my *In the Crossfire* and *Gateway to the Land of Absence*" (*Yazbek, 2021: 10*). The commentary illustrates how the author focuses on accurately reproducing the speech of her heroines to preserve their individuality, to give the stories a personal and at the same time literary look.

Each of the heroines has her own unique story, which reveals her own experience, as well as serving as part of a broader collective memory of the Syrian war. The author gathered testimonies from women from different regions of Syria, which allowed her to create a multifaceted picture of the war through personal perspectives: "A total of nineteen stories selected for the final version present the life stories of people from different settlements. These are cities, towns, villages and settlements such as Ghouta, Harasta, Zamalka, Saqba, Douma, Darayya, al-Mu'addamiya, Idlib and its surroundings, Aleppo, coastal areas (Tartus, Latakia), Homs, el-Quneitra, Raqqah, Deir ez-Zour, Damascus, Hama, etc." (*Yazbek, 2021: 11*). The systematic nature of Yazbek's documentary approach reveals itself in her meticulous attention to both content and form of each testimony. Working through various communication channels, she carefully preserved not just the factual accounts but also the individual manner of expression, emotional undertones, and unique speech patterns of each woman. This methodological precision in documentation created what emerges as a polyphony of authentic voices, each contributing its distinct perspective to the collective narrative. The geographical diversity of the testimonies thus serves a dual purpose: it provides comprehensive coverage of the war's impact while documenting how different communities and social contexts shaped women's experiences of the conflict. Together, these stories create a mosaic of the traumatic experiences of Syrian women, and each of them adds something new to the overall picture. They serve as an important source for preserving the collective memory of the war and its consequences.

The balance between fiction and real testimonies is achieved by minimal interference with the testimonies of the heroines. Yazbek keeps their stories as authentic as possible, preserving the natural rhythm of speech and emotional intonations, and, in fact, there is no “fiction” in her book. The author and researcher explains her approach: “However, after reviewing the notes again, it seemed that it would be best to leave the language of each interlocutor as it is. This is more honest and gives broader powers to make the book the voice of those it is about” (*Yazbek, 2021: 10*). This approach provides the reader with a sense of presence and allows for deeper penetration into the inner world of each woman, without distorting real events and emotions. The author thus ensures a balance between documentary and literary stylization. Yazbek’s book is an example of how personal stories serve as a bridge between individual and collective experience, forming a complex picture of war that cannot be fully captured through fiction or dry documentary alone.

All the heroines have real prototypes, their stories were recorded either in person, via video or by phone communication, emphasizing the importance of documentary evidence in building the narrative: “Such a “field work” became the cornerstone in writing this book, since in this way the necessary factual material was obtained” (*Yazbek, 2021: 10*). The use of evidence adds credibility to the work, makes it an important social document. The authenticity of each heroine’s stories enhances the narrative power of the book. The author gives each heroine the opportunity “to speak in her own voice”, preserving the individual characteristics of speech (*Yazbek, 2021: 10*). This emphasizes that even literary processing does not destroy the realism of the testimonies, but only enhances their emotional and psychological impact. Thus, Samar Yazbek creates a unique balance between fiction and documentary, which allows her to preserve real testimonies and at the same time make them part of a broader literary narrative. Golley’s research on Arab women’s life writing demonstrates how personal narratives become vehicles for both individual and collective identity formation. This analysis of how Arab women writers navigate between personal truth and social representation helps explain Yazbek’s careful preservation of authentic voices while maintaining literary coherence (*Golley, 2003*).

Yazbek’s documentary approach extends beyond mere collection of testimonies to a careful preservation of each woman’s unique voice and perspective. Her methodology demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how to maintain authenticity while creating a cohesive narrative structure. The power of this approach is particularly evident in how she preserves direct speech and internal monologues of her heroines. One example is the monologue of Leila from Homs, who recalls her feelings after her brother was killed by a sniper: “I knew: his life became the sacrifice that we laid on the altar of the execution of the dictator’s bloody plan unknown to us. There is no benefit for people from this war!” (*Yazbek, 2021: 119*).

The author’s decision to preserve the natural rhythm and individual characteristics of each woman’s speech serves a dual purpose: it maintains the documentary authenticity of the testimonies while creating a powerful literary effect. As she explains: “This is more honest and gives broader powers to make the book the voice of those it is about” (*Yazbek, 2021: 10*). Through such preservation of authentic voices, Yazbek allows the deep emotional resonance of the women’s experiences to emerge naturally, as evidenced in simple yet powerful statements like: “The mother still repeats: ‘If only I had given him those tomatoes...’” (*Yazbek, 2021: 27*).

This preservation of authentic voices contributes to the work’s value as both historical documentation and literary testimony. The careful balance between documentary precision and literary presentation allows the text to serve multiple functions: as a record of historical events, as a preservation of individual experiences, and as a contribution to collective memory.

Through this methodological approach, Yazbek creates a work that transcends traditional genre boundaries, establishing a new form of documentary literature that maintains historical accuracy and narrative power.

4. Conclusions

The representation of war trauma in Samar Yazbek's "19 Women: Tales of Resilience from Syria" demonstrates how documentary testimonies can be effectively combined with literary techniques to create both a historical record and an artistically powerful narrative. The author's methodological approach of preserving authentic voices while maintaining narrative cohesion allows her to capture the factual reality of war and its deep psychological impact on women's lives. Through careful preservation of individual testimonies and experiences, Yazbek creates a work that serves multiple purposes: as documentation of historical events, as exploration of war trauma's psychological impact, and as contribution to collective memory. The fragmentary nature of narratives, use of symbolism, and preservation of authentic voices create a powerful testament to women's experiences of war.

The book makes a significant contribution to understanding women's roles in conflict zones, highlighting their experiences not as victims but as witnesses and agents of social change. Their testimonies provide crucial insights into the immediate impact of war and its long-term psychological and social consequences. Through a combination of real stories and literary skill, the author makes the voices of Syrian women an important part of the discourse on the war and its aftermath, preserving experiences that might otherwise be marginalized in official historical accounts.

Further research could explore comparative analyses of women's war narratives across different conflicts and cultures, particularly examining parallels between Syrian women's experiences and those of women in other war zones, including the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. Such comparative studies would enhance our understanding of how war trauma is represented in literature and how personal narratives contribute to collective memory and historical documentation. Research devoted to the comparison of trauma narratives will allow us to identify common and distinctive features in the ways of representing war experiences in different cultures and countries, while helping to better understand the global impact of war on social identity, culture, and memory.

References

1. Alexander, J. C. (2012). *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Polity Press.
2. Golley, N. A. (2003). *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing*. Syracuse University Press.
3. Golley, N. A. (2003a). *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story*. University of Texas Press.
4. Beverley, J. (2004). *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. University of Minnesota Press.
5. Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
6. Cooke, M. (1996). *Women and the War Story*. University of California Press.
7. Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Routledge.

8. Herman, J. (2015). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books.
9. Higonnet, M. R. (1987). *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars*. Yale University Press.
10. LaCapra, D. (2014). *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
11. Whitlock, G. (2006). *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. University of Chicago Press.
12. Yazbek, S. (2021). *19 zhinok. Syriys'ka spovid' [19 Women: Tales of Resilience from Syria]*. Translation from Arabic by Serhii Rybalkin. Nika-Centre. [In Ukrainian].