

“You have to survive”: Reading trauma, survival and adolescent resilience in N.H.

Senzai’s contemporary young adult war narrative, *Escape from Aleppo*

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Abstract: In recent years, millions of Syrians – one-third of them under the age of 18 – have sought refuge in neighbouring and far off regions. This article explores the representations of the impact of trauma on young people and their prospects for healing in N.H. Senzai’s 2018 Young Adult novel, *Escape from Aleppo*. Recent scholarship on decolonizing trauma studies urges approaches that incorporate aspects of recuperation and resilience, focusing on the possibility of post-traumatic growth and healing. Situated at the intersection of trauma studies and young adult literature, this article examines the post-traumatic growth of Senzai’s young protagonist through negotiations with history that foster resilience and help Syrians to cope with distress. Representing survival through the conventions of the Young Adult genre, the novel balances two extremes – suffering and hopefulness – and provides an alternative response to trauma that highlights emotional growth through localized systems of knowledge available to young survivors.

Keywords: resilience; trauma; Young Adult fiction; Syrian war; migration, N. H. Senzai

Introduction: Trauma and survival in Syria

We expect children to be helpless, passive, and powerless in the violent social and political worlds we have made (Bosmajian 2002, ix)

The war in Syria that began as a political uprising in 2011 produced the “Decade of Displacement” after forcefully displacing more than 6.6 million people from Syria to various parts of the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], n.d.). Since half of these displaced people are under the age of 18 (UNHCR n.d.), themes of war, trauma, loss and suffering dominate the contemporary Young Adult (YA) anglophone literature from the Middle East (Parsons 2016). N. H. Senzai’s (2018) novel, *Escape from Aleppo*, is one such novel that illustrates the perils of leaving behind one’s home and homeland as well as the harrowing experiences of surviving in a warzone. Naheed Hasnat Senzai (or N.H. Senzai), “born in Chicago to Indian-Pakistani parents” (Rowe 2018, n.p.), is a US-based author who grew up in Saudi Arabia. Her experiences in the Middle East, and discussions with her Afghan husband, Farid Senzai, who teaches Middle East politics (n.p.), inspire her work for young readers on conflict prone and under-represented parts of the world such as Syria and Afghanistan, and the YA (young adult) genre’s limited representation in English of trauma due to war in the Middle East.

Escape from Aleppo is set during the initial years of the Syrian conflict in 2011, when the civil uprising escalated into warfare. The protagonist is a 12-year-old girl, Nadia, separated from her family by an explosion in her neighbourhood that destroys her home. The novel depicts through her journey to safety the ordeal of surviving a political and refugee crisis. Left behind in the aftermath of the airstrike, Nadia begins her journey with the goal of reuniting with her parents along the planned route of their

escape from the burning city of Aleppo. As she traverses her way to shelter and protection on the other side of the Syrian border in Turkey, she rediscovers Syria's ancient history amidst the ruins of the contemporary war.

Although childhood resilience and agency are key tropes of children's and YA literature, trauma studies predominantly resist such a depiction of optimism and expectancy. Through a reading of the treatment of survival in *Escape from Aleppo*, this article seeks to interrogate the scope of resilience and agency among adolescents in global conflicts, as explored within these two branches – trauma fiction and YA fiction – of literary studies. It studies the way the novel uses the contrast between the historical ruins of the city and those brought about by the contemporary war to reflect on the protagonist's post-traumatic growth. Examining literary trauma theory, its postcolonial turn and its effect on YA fiction, the article evaluates the representation of resilience in *Escape from Aleppo*. It approaches the novel's use of the historical materials to depict this resilience through three sections: Coming to terms with "Paradise Lost", Rescued ruins: Resilience through reconstruction, and Resilience: The path to recovery. The adolescent survivors of trauma in the Syrian war partake in a more or less hopeful story of survival and resilience, which seeks to contribute to the sites of enquiry in trauma studies' postcolonial turn.

Trauma paradigms

The multidisciplinary and historically diverse phenomenon of trauma discourse begins with the intersection of psychoanalysis and literary studies as a means of comprehending the ordeal of survival. Although trauma studies as a discipline date back to the 18th century, contemporary literary trauma studies began as a moral response to the Holocaust in the late 20th century (Davis and Meretoja 2020). Cathy Caruth (1995) maintains that literary trauma studies explore the "enigmatic relation between trauma

and survival: the fact that, for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic” (9). For Caruth, surviving trauma is a crisis in itself, as trauma disrupts the comprehension of time’s linear progression. Lawrence Langer (1991) refers to this ruptured pattern of recall as disruptive memory, which “recalls a present history vexed by traumas that thwart smooth-flowing chronicles” (2). As the traumatic event lies outside the range of daily life experience, and “cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge” (Caruth 1995, 153), its memory repeats belatedly and seeks to “be integrated into existing meaning schemes and be transformed into narrative language” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995, 176). Caruth thus defines the disruptive effect of trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1995, 11). As a result, trauma emerges as an event, which surpasses all expectations and understanding for those who live through it since it lies outside the realm of prior experience.

Reviewing the experience of this extreme shock, Langer (1991) opposes the possibility of constructing a hopeful narrative. He insists that trauma produces “anguished memory, humiliated memory [...] an especially intense form of uncompensating recall [... that] reanimat[es] the governing impotence of the worst moments in a distinctly non-therapeutic way” (84). According to Maurice Blanchot (1985), this traumatic “sur-vival [sur-vie] is no longer life, it is the break from living affirmation” (68), which reflects the inability of survivors to lead their lives as they did before the tragic event. His association of the word survival with the French word for life – *vie* – highlights the impact of loss on life and the “impossibility of its [loss’s]

disappearance” (Rothberg 2000, 81) since survivors are forced to live with the memory before, during and after the traumatic event simultaneously.

Correspondingly, Langer contends that the survivors develop a “diminished self” (1991, 175) in the aftermath of trauma; this occurs through remembrances of the unheroic memory that negates any possibility of a hopeful and expectant future. He argues that Holocaust testimonies produce a “complex version of existence”, which he calls “*staying alive* instead of the more consoling and affirmative *survival*” (175; original emphasis). For this reason, Holocaust testimonies consciously avoid associating their narratives with a hopeful or expectant vocabulary that would imply triumph over the horrific event and its memory. Langer uses “staying alive” as a contrast to remaining dead, which he concurs was the “reality of [the] milieu” (106). Thus, surviving the traumatic event was not a positive incident, as “the future meant only tomorrow, and tomorrow meant death” (175). This comprehension of time after the trauma as a “continuously impending doom” (175) eradicates any scope for hope and optimism, even when the victims have endured the worst and survived. The insistence on a diminished sense of self after disaster is predominant in the scholarship on trauma.

Recently, scholars have challenged this understanding of trauma constructed around the Holocaust. Stef Craps (2013) “interrogates hegemonic definitions of trauma which are not scientifically neutral but culturally specific” (21) and advocates a reform of the trauma paradigm in order to include and examine non-western experiences of trauma. According to Craps, trauma does not necessarily produce a rupture in temporality or have to be outside the range of the everyday experience. Instead, he encourages those working in this area to include in their studies “racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism, and other forms of structural oppression”, which may not be diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because of the absence of “an overt

threat or act of violence” (26). Such a strategy would widen the scope of trauma studies and allow it to contemplate suffering from other parts of the world besides the European experience. Irene Visser (2015) similarly maintains that postcolonial trauma theory “demonstrate[s] that resilience and growth are possible in the aftermath of traumatic wounding” without “negating the lasting, profound impact of trauma” (255). The critical lens of postcolonial trauma theory offered by Craps (2013) and Visser (2015) thus becomes a fitting framework to approach the trauma and resilience of young adult survivors in the Syrian war, as it insists on exploring trauma through culturally specific and life-affirming ways in literary narratives, as opposed to the weakened state.

Highlighting the imbalance in the enquiry of traumatic experiences across the world, Rosemary Sayigh (2013) argues that insufficient research has been conducted on historical forms of suffering such as those caused by “slavery, destruction of aboriginal communities, wars, genocides, imperialistic and post-imperialistic oppression” (54). She is particularly critical of the lack of scholarly attention to the Palestinian trauma of al-Nakba from the broader discourse, claiming that it “remains glaringly absent from the field” (52). Similarly, Rahul K. Gairola and Sharanya Jayawickrama (2021) raise the issue of marginalization and misrepresentation of Asian experiences of trauma. They maintain that “contemporary Asia is a region in which traumatic legacies of colonialism persist and [...] wrought untold human suffering that is punctuated by conspicuous silence in the field of trauma studies” (5). There are diverse ways of experiencing pain and suffering, as well as coping with distress, and the established discourse “fall[s] short of including substantial and sustained Asian perspectives” (8). Therefore, this failure of the prevailing approach to gauge and empathize with the varied forms of trauma suffered by people across the world compels postcolonial trauma scholars to look “beyond eurocentricism”, as advocated by Craps.

Postcolonial trauma studies seek to encompass non-western forms of normality, which involves “oppression, deprivation, and upheaval; [while] freedom, affluence, and stability – the Western standard of normality – are actually the exception rather than the rule” (Craps 2014, 53). In order to manage this enduring suffering, Ananya Jahanara Kabir (2014) draws attention to the localized forms of persisting in the aftermath of Partition in the Indian sub-continent. Her exploration of the coexistence of “the museological, the meditative and the iterative” points toward new means of studying “culturally-specific mechanisms through which trauma is survived and surmounted” (69). In a similar vein, Michael Rothberg (2014) encourages the contemplation of various localized systems of knowledge of resistance, resilience and healing that can be used to recover from community specific distress. Thus, current trauma theory clearly accentuates the scope for a more comprehensive understanding of localized forms of coping with distress and post traumatic growth. The following discussion uses *Escape from Aleppo* to explore non-western form of traumatic suffering and the responses to it as it concentrates on whether trauma survivors really lack agency and hope.

Coming to terms with “Paradise Lost”

The narrative style of *Escape from Aleppo* registers traumatic rupture of the kind that Caruth (1995) emphasizes, which is “not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly” (4). However, in the novel, as discussed below, it simultaneously presents possibilities of post-traumatic growth and hope as “the crisis of representation caused by trauma generates narrative possibility just as much as narrative impossibility” (Craps 41). The traumatic recall is depicted through a sudden airstrike in Nadia’s neighbourhood which triggers flashbacks from Nadia’s past experiences in the Syrian war as well as the overall chaos in Syria due to the civil conflict. Nadia wakes up to the escape alarm in the middle of the night at her home,

A deep boom in the distance. She froze. [...] ‘No, no, no! Make it go away,’ she breathed, [...]

Fear curled through her belly. Her ears homed in on the echoes [...] With lightning speed, her mind calculated the vibrations back to the point of the bomb’s impact, a skill she has perfected since the war began. (Senzai 2018, 2)

Nadia’s trauma is triggered by loud noises and abrupt intrusion. However, the narrative moves beyond this conventional representation of trauma by introducing the history of war in the region and the ways in which Syrians have dealt with it in the past. She is separated from her family members in the aftermath of the bombing amidst the ensuing chaos, “*No, don’t leave me!*” thought Nadia, her head throbbing as she drifted in and out of consciousness” (18, original emphasis). As Nadia traces her family through the devastated streets after the bombings with the help of an old man, Ammo Mazen, she discusses with him the pluralistic and peaceful historical past of Syria. Looking around at the present state of Aleppo, Mazen cries, “What a shame it all is, [...] Salaheddine would be turning over in his grave” (Senzai 2018, 74). His disbelief at the devastation reminds him of the lost “paradise” of the once peaceful and prosperous city. Nadia mumbles “Huh?” (74) responding to Mazen’s reflections, “not really paying attention as bitter thoughts raced through her head of the day when life as she had known it had changed forever” (74).

Reacting to her lack of interest, Mazen questions: “Don’t they teach you anything at school these days?” (Senzai 2018, 74). The neighbourhood in which Nadia lived, “on the western edge of Salaheddine [had] borne the mother of all battles since the war began” (73) in Syria. “Nadia nodded, pushing back memories of a hot evening in July, more than a year ago, when gunfire had broken out a few miles from their home, triggering the battle for Aleppo” (73). The neighbourhood reminds Mazen of the

“great Kurdish warrior [Salaheddine] who united the lands from North Africa to Syria. He drove European crusaders from the holy city of Jerusalem and founded the Ayyubid dynasty” (74). Listening to the fascinating history of Salaheddine and Aleppo, Nadia thinks, “Even though she didn’t much care about dead historical figures, or living ones either, [she realized,] he had a point” (Senzai 2018, 75). This conversation about Syrian history and its present depicts the transference of historical memory from one generation to another, evoked by the present warfare in Aleppo.

This form of transmission resembles Marianne Hirsch’s (2012) concept of “postmemory” in which “the ‘generation after’ bears [a relationship] to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images and behaviours among which they grew up” (5). Thus, the generation that comes after the traumatic event absorbs and sustains the traumatic memory through cultural transfer. Interestingly, even though the discussion between Mazen and Nadia prompts some bitterness, it arouses a nostalgic memory under the harrowing circumstances. Initially, she becomes preoccupied with the memory of her neighbourhood in Salaheddine. However, as their conversation progresses, she remembers the legends of the warrior on a soap-opera – “a swashbuckling adventure, filled with battles, intrigues, great one-liners, and beautiful heroines” (Senzai 2018, 74) – and the impressive demeanour of “the guy who’d played him [...] especially when he’d taken Jerusalem and spared the lives of all the Christians and Jews in the city” (75).

Nadia and Mazen’s patterns of historical remembrance appear antithetical as the older generation clearly remembers the history of their land, while the younger generation is oblivious to it. However, the reference to the nostalgic memory of the Syrian warrior activates Nadia’s encounter with Salaheddine’s history, which further

develops this transaction of memory. She remembers, “Salaheddine had been respected, even by his enemies, for his *fairness* in battle” (Senzai 2018, 75; emphasis added). She admires Salaheddine’s compassion for human beings – even his prisoners, “when he’d taken Jerusalem and spared the lives of all the Christians and Jews in the city” (75). In this instance, Nadia reminisces about Salaheddine through her recall of the TV show; however, this postmemory blends into nostalgia for a time that the protagonist did not live through but hopes to return to in future. She consoles herself by means of this selective recapitulation of Salaheddine’s accomplishments in war, which had inspired the name of her neighbourhood.

This use of selective memory to soothe traumatic suffering aligns with Katherine Hodgkin’s and Susannah Radstone’s (2003) argument that “place names are one way of insisting on the reality of a particular version of the past, and also (therefore) of the present” (11). Dwelling on the name of the neighbourhood and the Syrian warrior – Salaheddine – thus cements this selective memory, which performs “a resistant relationship to the present”, as argued by Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer (2003, 83). The selective recall of the comforting memory arguably presents “a ‘critical utopianism’ that envisions a better future” (83). According to them, a “past reconstructed through the animating vision of nostalgia [...] can serve as a creative inspiration and possible emulation within the present, ‘called upon to provide what the present lacks’” (83). This selective remembrance is vital in confronting the harrowing experiences in the present, by willfully projecting oneself into the imagined “paradise” of the past, a process close to utopianism, to temporarily relieve distress. Similarly, Ingrid Løland (2020) argues, “mnemonic images of the homeland, of former ways of life and of memorable moments, relations and identities [...] reach back to a ‘paradise lost’ (Arab. *Al-Firdaws al-Mafqud*), embracing positive memories of a nostalgic time

and space with longing and belonging” (750). It indicates that nostalgia has a significant place in the process of coping with distress as the discussion on Salaheddine – the neighbourhood and the warrior – briefly mitigates Nadia’s trauma by eliciting pleasant memories of watching the soap-opera with her family to counter the distressing and lonely present.

Nadia employs such a selection of memory to momentarily alleviate her suffering as she contrasts the present state of Aleppo and Syria – where the state army reportedly bombs and kills its own citizens (“Yet Another Massacre” 2013, 48) – with the nostalgic remembrance of ancient Aleppo. Indulging in this “critical utopianism” (Bal 1999, 72) empowers her to envision a bearable future, restoring her agency despite debilitating conditions. On their journey, Nadia and Mazen encounter a rebel, who confesses: “After the war I just want things to return to how they were [...]. Nadia nodded wholeheartedly, willing to do just about anything to go back to how things were” (Senzai 2018, 88). In such desperate times, the refusal to succumb to bleak reality, and the desire to make Syria a better place to live through nostalgic remembrance, emerges as a resilient step for the young protagonist.

Moreover, Nadia learns to further negotiate her distress through historical knowledge when she learns about the tragic history of the Alawites in Syria – a community “to which the Assad family and the ruling party belonged” (Senzai 2018, 76). Looking at Bashar al-Assad’s portrait, Nadia, “seething with a sudden burst of rage [...] without even realizing what she was doing [...], took aim and spat, hitting the narrow, weak-chinned face” (76). Mazen pacifies her and informs her, “under the Ottoman rule, [Alawites] were abused and reviled. [Their] women and children were sold into slavery” (77). This unfamiliar historical account transforms Nadia’s anger into indignation – “She’d never heard that before” (77) – which distracts her from the

surrounding conflict. It provides her with the space to pause and reflect on the past, learn from history, and produce a meaningful and measured response to her trauma. Since resilience is the “reintegration of self that includes a conscious effort to move forward in an insightful integrated positive manner as a result of lessons learned from an adverse experience” (Southwick et al. 2014, 3), Nadia’s resilience lies in her ability to negotiate with reality and accommodate the present with respect to the past as she learns about different histories of her homeland. Hearing about the Alawites’ exploitation of power, “her cheeks reddened with heat as she acknowledged that Sunni businessmen, like her grandfather, had worked with the Alawite government to secure their own financial success. It was a devilish deal” (Senzai 2018, 78). While her perception of Assad does not drastically change thereafter, her anger is tempered as she learns about the various phases of the conflict. This involvement “with both the positive and the negative in the past at the site [of trauma in] journeys of return require a renegotiation of the conflicting memories that constitute the returnee’s ideas of ‘home’” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2003, 84). In other words, Nadia’s familiarization with contrasting images of Syria over centuries is essential to develop a critical understanding of her nostalgic memory and of the Syria to which she hopes to return in the future. Through this negotiation with the distressing history that complicates her nostalgia, she gains some agency as she seeks a country that does not “stage economic progress and stability in exchange for military rule and dictatorship” (Senzai 2018, 78). As a 12-year-old girl, her capacity to identify the future that she envisions for Syria, her homeland, signifies her emotional growth despite her harrowing journey.

It is worth mentioning that the episode regarding Assad and Alawite history comes immediately after the mention of Salaheddine and his honourable feats. The narrative trajectory, which evokes one historical event after another over a significant

period, indicates strategies to deal with trauma and persist, despite adverse circumstances. This strategic narrative transition indirectly marks resilience, as it paradoxically demonstrates the process of moving on by shifting both Nadia's and readers' attention to a different aspect of Syrian history from the present trauma. This capacity to negotiate different historical pasts in order to form a stronger response to trauma in the present, signifies the post-traumatic growth of the character. If resilience involves "not succumbing to risk-induced negative outcomes that most suffer" (Barber 2009, 462), then, Nadia's muted growth signifies this progressive development in the face of adversity.

In contrast to the diminished self and unheroic memories of trauma that Langer emphasizes, *Escape from Aleppo* presents the revival of agency through unusual sites of memory. While trauma testimonies are seen by Langer as performing a shift from "heroic memory [that] honors the connection between agency and fate, [to] unheroic memory [that] records its absence" (1991, 193), Nadia's return to the nostalgic past establishes itself as a meaningful way of dealing with trauma as the young protagonist adapts emotionally to changed circumstances. Revisiting the latent historical knowledge about Aleppo and Syria, Nadia and Mazen build a connection that enables them to endure their suffering. Diverging from the "continuously impending doom" that Langer (1991, 175) sees as anticipated by trauma response, Nadia, in response to the nostalgic memory, produces a different manner of dealing with trauma – assigning "meaning to themes of recuperation, redress and resilience", as Visser (2015, 254) insists – and suggests the possibility of positive growth in the aftermath of trauma.

Rescued ruins: Resilience through reconstruction

Postcolonial trauma fiction often “critically reflects on the possibilities for healing and reconciliation in the wake of the traumas of colonialism and apartheid” (Craps 2013, 55-56). *Escape from Aleppo* illustrates such resilience and the possibility of post-traumatic growth as Nadia encounters several people working towards rebuilding Syria during the war. Their collective effort symbolizes resistance to the forces involved in destroying it. Mazen introduces Nadia to Professor Laila Saifi, who “ran the archaeology department at the university [before the war and] is now leading a heroic effort to preserve [Syria’s] history” (Senzai 2018, 163). As Nadia and her companion, Basel, learn about the efforts of Professor Saifi, they remember Syria not for what it has become, but for what it once was and entertain the possibility of its reconstruction. Looking at a rare artefact – a piece of Ebla tablets displayed in the National Museum of Aleppo before the war – Professor Saifi informs Nadia and Basel about its significance in Syrian history, that it

was found in the ancient city of Ebla, just south of here. The Sumerian text provides evidence that nearly five thousand years ago, a rich civilization flourished here, perhaps the first recorded world power, equal to that of Egypt or Mesopotamia. (168)

The National Museum of Aleppo reflects the pride and sentiment attached to Syrian historical treasures. Kari A. Zabler (2011) contends that historical items preserved at the national museum were refashioned “to promote Syrian identity and cast off the colonial yoke, though the process is still ongoing as they [Syrians] reconcile political independence with the vestiges of a colonial system and lack of financial resources” (171). Museums in Syria were co-opted post-independence so as “to create a sense of shared identity in the ‘imagined community’ of the nation-state” (2011, 174). After the retreat of the colonial powers, several Arab sects and tribes united under this new

national construct and the “Syrian national museums became the keepers of the material evidence of this cohesion, built on a shared past and landscape” (174). Zabler’s account implies that the artefacts in the National Museum of Aleppo, because of their shared historical importance, assist in maintaining coherence and peace in Syria.

Emphasizing the significance of museums in the social fabric of Syria, Hiba Qassar (2021) argues that the modification of museums aimed “to connect ‘local history’ with ancient history and retell the history of Syria through a new vision closer to contemporary Syrian society” (22). Thus, the rescuing of these ruins implies the invention of tradition at a time when the nation is struggling with another political crisis. Professor Saifi’s husband and assistant, Rasheed, reveals that “the staff at the museum [of Aleppo] had locked up the building and taken up arms to protect whatever remains [of the artefacts]” (Senzai 2018, 168). Such risk-taking suggests Syrians’ deep connection with their history and the past, which sustains them and motivates them to face their contemporary ordeal with courage.

Additionally, the catastrophic loss and damage of almost “forty percent of the city’s ancient landmarks [...] since the war began, [...][m]ost of the museums in the country, and all six of Syria’s World heritage sites” (Senzai 2018, 164), intensify the trauma for Syrians. Hence, the efforts to rescue museum artefacts symbolize an assertion of historical memory and continuity, which enables the Syrians “to reconnect an idea of the city which they had continued to keep alive in their minds to the sites which they had once held so dear: to view these and touch them again in a material sense” (Hirsch and Spitzer 2003, 83), even in the face of irrevocable loss. In the present, the burning city of Aleppo is kept alive in the collective memory through the historical knowledge contained in museums and other forms of cultural transmission. Alluding to

that utopian memory, Syrians reimagine the now destroyed city of Aleppo through the memorials that signify its heritage. As Nadia holds the treasured coins with

the head of Seleucus, general under Alexander the Great, Greek in origin, [...] Zenobia, Palmyra's third-century Syrian queen, who revolted against the Roman Empire [and] Salaheddine, [she gets] the sensation that they have a spirit and a soul. Losing them is like losing a person. (Senzai 2018, 169)

This direct correlation of Syrian artefacts with the soul of a person demonstrates the significance of history in reconstructing the memory of Syria as a land beyond contemporary war and conflict. In this deliberate collective remembrance and reconstruction of Aleppo, the young adult characters, Nadia and Basel, resist their vulnerable conditions of existence. They assert their sense of agency by recalling ancient history even when the current environment prevents them from obtaining formal education on these topics.

Moreover, the way Nadia associates historical coins with the souls of certain people compels one to re-evaluate the value of ruins and wastes produced in war. As Tasnim Qutait (2020) argues, the surplus waste of war stands in contrast to the “disenfranchised lives [that] are framed through an overwhelming discourse that speaks of movement as crisis and people as surplus” (119) in the Syrian War and the subsequent Migration Crisis. Thus, the struggle of Nadia, Basel and their companions to preserve the valuable historical artefacts and salvage their history from the surplus ruins of the war symbolizes the challenge that Syrians face as they escape war and seek refuge amidst the surge of migrants (the metaphorical ruins of war) on foreign shores, and further reiterates the resilience of these young characters.

Hence, instead of recalling Langer's accounts of the "communal wound that cannot heal" (1991, 204) and a victimhood that "wail[s] beneath the convalescent murmur of [trauma survivors'] surface lives" (204–205), the trajectory of the young trauma survivor in *Escape from Aleppo* emphasizes persistence, and the will to envision an optimistic future for herself and her country. In this way, the novel accounts for "not only melancholia, weakness and stasis but also the completely opposite dynamics of life-affirming and activist processes" (Visser 2015, 254) that suggest other ways of surviving the trauma.

Resilience: The path to recovery

An insistence on "renewed life and growth after traumatization" (Visser 2015, 255) characterizes postcolonial trauma narratives, which emphasize resilience and survival rather than aporia and unrepresentability. Therefore, the search for hope in order to survive wartime trauma pervades the novel, as Nadia holds on to stories, material objects and cultural beliefs while she navigates her harrowing journey. She takes inspiration from the determination of fellow Syrians, both members of rebel groups and the state army, who collectively strive to preserve the history of Aleppo. Rasheed comments, "the one blessing in this catastrophe is that the mutual love for our history and art has both sides of the war working together" (Senzai 2018, 164). He further discloses that "rebel-friendly archaeologists and the locals of Idlib brokered an agreement with the army to put valuable artifacts behind a thick layer of concrete in the local museum, sealing it off" (164). Such collective efforts inspire resilience within Nadia and she hangs on to this encouraging development amidst the destruction. Judith Herman ([1992] 2015) argues that recovery from trauma is "based on the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections" (145). Visser (2015) builds on Herman's idea to press for the therapeutic benefits of trauma narratives in contrast to

Caruth (1995), who “opposes notions of the therapeutic and recuperative value of narrative that are prioritized in other theories of trauma” (256). Here, the empowerment of the trauma survivor implies their resilient capability, augmented by the creation of new social and cultural connections. Thus, the determination of Syrians to protect their historical and cultural heritage renews Nadia’s capacity to trust and sustains her faith in the future. This collective social action “offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities far and beyond her own capacities” (225). Social connection and collective remedial action amplify the strength of the trauma survivor and embolden them to take active steps to cope with their distress.

Nadia, who wishes to participate in the preservation of the treasures from the museum, asks, “can we help?” (Senzai 2018, 170). Through her contribution to rebuilding her city, she hopes to rebuild herself. This collective action provides Nadia with “a shared purpose” (Herman [1992] 2015, 225), which further inspires her to “attain a feeling of participation in an order of creation that transcends ordinary reality” (226). For Aida Alayarian (2015), resilience is similar to a healthy dissociation that redirects the “attention away from something traumatic which might otherwise interfere with or overwhelm psychic structure, functions, and general psychological well-being” (79). In a similar way, *Escape from Aleppo* deflects the attention of its YA characters by highlighting the compassion and determination of the Syrian community, stimulated by its ancient history. They develop resilience and learn effective ways to deal with trauma by discovering extraordinary strength and hope in places ruined by war. A Syrian artist in diaspora, Nasser Rabbat, has expressed the hope that “since 2011, as Syria transforms into many Syrias, with divisions between communities, [...] Syria’s past can be a path to its future” (quoted in Azzouz 2020, 190). With this resilient spirit, embodied in

Nadia's response to her trauma, *Escape from Aleppo* deflects the attention of its readers from death and destruction towards hopeful recuperation and restoration of the nation. As a result, the novel presents the "theme of recuperation through activist [-like] resistance [...] found in much postcolonial trauma criticism" (Visser 2015, 256-57) as opposed to debilitated survivors expected in Caruth (1995) and Langer's (1991) approach to trauma studies.

Trauma in *Escape from Aleppo* and the Young Adult genre

Maintaining a safe distance from violence, death and war, YA literature explores the struggles of adolescents to survive a turbulent phase in their life. Mike Cadden (2011) contends, "the YA novel [...] is often a crisis driven narrative" (308) that "continues to be the story of enlightenment through personal struggle and reflection" (310). Such an account implies that the YA genre is committed to a narrative strategy of empowerment and progress, even when it deals with difficult subject matter. It aligns with Craps (2013) and Visser's (2015) vision of postcolonial trauma studies that insists on looking at other modes of representing trauma that offer life-affirming and recuperative themes.

Assessing the limitations of the YA genre, Kenneth Kidd (2011) stresses that the position of trauma and atrocity "remains a complicated affair, especially given an ongoing conviction that such literature should be happy and uplifting, or at least not *too* disturbing" (183; original emphasis). The limitations of the genre emerge from the desire of certain stakeholders to shield young people from the disturbing social and political reality that surrounds them. Yet Hamida Bosmajian (2002) posits, "most children exist in the social and political realities of their contexts" (ix). Therefore, highlighting this asymmetrical childhood and adolescence around the world, she argues for a realistic representation of these experiences. As Kidd (2011) states, children's and

young adult literature with distressing themes is mainly focused on the “management of trauma”, rather than presenting the “profound emotional and psychological effects of trauma – even the impossibility of recovery” (182). Correspondingly, Larry R. Johannessen (1993) argues that even the very few literary works that deal with atrocity and violence as subject matter do not engage with traumatic experience directly. Instead, they tend to romanticize heroism through texts about “combat narrative” (43) experience about fights in the war. Nonetheless, YA authors in recent years have begun to produce realistic narratives of trauma in which they utilize the framework of optimism and resilience to portray extreme conditions in contrast to the ordinary circumstances of the majority of their young readers’ existence (Saxena and Sigroha 2019). Roberta Trites (1998) writes,

The Young Adult novel [...] came into being as a genre precisely because it is a genre predicated on demonstrating [a] character’s ability to grow into an acceptance of their environment. [It] teaches adolescents how to exist within the [...] institutions that necessarily define teenagers’ existence. (19)

The treatment of trauma within the YA discourse therefore opens the possibility of depicting an outlook based on resilience in the face of adversity. It allows authors to create characters who learn to some degree to live with their suffering and eventually cope with distress. *Escape from Aleppo* balances the trauma of surviving the war with ingenious forms of optimism and resilience, experienced at unexpected and unexplored sites. While the majority of YA trauma narratives represent “either hope or loss, understanding or confusion, but rarely both” (Martin 2004, 317), Senzai’s novel emphasizes the coexistence of hope and despair as Nadia learns to survive. By

accentuating such coexistence of two extremes, the novel abstains from overly optimistic glossing of the trauma narrative for young readers.

The war-torn city and its wrecked social and physical infrastructure in the novel represent the incapacitating environment within which Nadia uses her ingenuity to draw strength from the resources available to her. Resisting any radical growth in the character, the novel presents constrained emotional progress of the survivor, from a weakened state to a more empowered one. Nadia's emotional development signifies post-traumatic growth of the YA trauma survivor, which many in the field of trauma studies fail to highlight. This emotional growth inspires resilience as it enables the young protagonist to move from what Maria Tatar (2010) calls a "disempowered state to a condition that may not be emancipation but marks the beginnings of some form of agency" (63). Thus, even though the accepted conventions of the YA genre would seem to demand optimism, *Escape from Aleppo* presents recovery from trauma as a complex process by continuously reinstating the YA protagonist in challenging situations that demand courage and determination.

While the narrative trajectory of *Escape from Aleppo* may seem romanticized, it balances the two extremes of suffering and hopefulness by emphasizing in its epilogue that a happy ending similar to Nadia's is a rare event. Senzai divulges that writing this novel "was an emotional and creative challenge to address the complex, volatile issues of Syrian war" and to "be as sensitive and accurate [... in] highlighting the beauty and resilience of the Syrian people in the face of adversity" (2018, 325). Despite the demands of the genre, such contemporary trauma fictions for young readers produce a narrative that does not gloss over the suffering of trauma victims nor underplay the ordeal of their survival. Instead, it presents "diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate" (Craps 2013, 43).

Conclusion: Negotiating trauma and hope

As a YA trauma narrative, *Escape from Aleppo* offers an intersection of nostalgic memory and history that produces a space for negotiating distress and enables recovery of the survivor through “critical utopianism” (Bal 1999, 72). Even though the nostalgia is not without its own traumatic occurrences, Nadia’s selective retrieval of this historical memory aids in relieving her suffering and assists her in envisioning a better future. Thus, Senzai emphasizes the way that historical knowledge can enhance resilience among adolescent trauma survivors. *Escape from Aleppo* allows its adolescent protagonist to develop a critical response to trauma and survive. Even though representations of accommodation with trauma are uncommon in YA literature, the genre can provide a non-romanticized account of withstanding trauma. This article, through the analysis of understudied genre of YA trauma narratives set in non-western locales, argues for post-traumatic growth through localized knowledge and acknowledges the potential for limited agency of the young survivors in debilitating conditions. Further studies in resilience are required to address this distinct way of enduring trauma, which allows the coexistence of hope and despair. Although this model does not promote the idea of absolute recovery and healing, it encourages a negotiation between the traumatic and hopeful recuperation to work through distress. Moreover, the analysis of *Escape from Aleppo* in this article has demonstrated that the model of trauma theory advocated by Craps, Visser and their contemporaries is a more inclusive manner of understanding trauma as it incorporates other ways of experiencing trauma that are not deprived of optimism and hope.

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