

**Trauma, Narrative, and History in Rabee Jaber's *Yusef the Englishman* and *The Druze of Belgrade***

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**Abstract**

The paper employs Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to read two historical novels by Lebanese novelist Rabee Jaber: *Yusef the Englishman* and *The Druze of Belgrade*. Deploying the features of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Jaber uses the paradox of "immediacy and belatedness", and "recurrence", insofar as they become features of all aspects of his narrative technique. Jaber is thus able to avoid the pitfalls of sectarianism and partisanship that are all too common in the historiography of Lebanon. The juxtaposition of traumatic events with motifs of rebirth and regeneration makes readers feel they are, to use John Russon's term, "bearing witness to [the] epiphany" of human greatness. In light of this epiphany, self-aggrandizing, grievances-nurturing, and mutually-incriminating narratives are shown to be not only a threat to stability and peaceful coexistence, but also an ignorant/arrogant reproduction of the trauma and victimization that have caused them to be written in the first place.

**Keywords:** Rabee Jaber; Lebanese novel; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; bearing witness; epiphany; contemporary Arabic literature.

**"الصدمة التاريخية و النص الأدبي في رواياتي يوسف الانجليزى و دروز بلغراد: حكاية  
حنا يعقوب للأديب اللبناني ربيع جابر"  
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**الملخص**

يتناول البحث تطبيق نظرية "أعراض ما بعد الصدمة" فى الدراسة الأدبية  
لنصوص روايتين من الأدب العربى المعاصر للأديب اللبناني الحائز على الجائزة الدولية  
للأدب العربى لعام 2011  
وتهدف الدراسة الى ابراز التطابق بين الخصائص السردية للنصين وبين  
المفارقات الحادة التى تميز الأعراض النفسية لحالات ما بعد الصدمة مثل المفارقة بين  
"أنية" الصدمة و"تأخر" ظهور الأعراض و"تكرار" ظهورها على المدى الطويل.  
وتصل الدراسة الى نتيجة مفادها أن ربيع جابر قام بتوظيف خصائص ما بعد  
الصدمة للخروج من اشكاليات الطائفية و التحزب والتركيز على ثنائية تعظيم الذات  
وتشويه الآخر التى طالما أصابت النصوص الأدبية والتاريخية التى تتناول تاريخ لبنان  
فى كافة العصور، واستطاع ربيع جابر أن يتسامى فوق الخلافات المحددة بمكان جغرافى  
و زمن تاريخى، وأن يصل الى فضاء رحب يتسع للبشرية جمعاء.

"In the oral history or popular memory of Mount Lebanon and Beirut ... there are two events around which tales are spun: 1) The 1860 civil war and subsequent international intervention ... 2) The famine of the Great War, the locusts and the mass Lebanese emigration to lands beyond the sea."<sup>1</sup>

The present study argues that the novels of Rabee Jaber in general, and *Yusef the Englishman*<sup>2</sup> and *The Druze of Belgrade: The Story of Hanna Yaaqoub*<sup>3</sup> in particular, employ, both thematically and stylistically, the strategies of trauma narratives discussed by trauma theorists as a way out of the dilemma of engaging with Lebanese historiography. The selection of the two novels under study was influenced by connections between them highlighted by the author himself: in an interview with the International Prize for Arabic Fiction's (IPAF) organizers in 2011,<sup>4</sup> Jaber points out that both *The Druze of Belgrade (DB)*, the IPAF-winner of 2012, and the earlier *Yusef the Englishman (YE)*, deal with consecutive periods in the history of Lebanon, and that one of the major characters of *DB* – Nouredine, a member of the Druze community of Mount Lebanon, and a probable ancestor of Jaber – actually comes out of the world of the earlier novel (*YE*). The following pages attempt an exposition of how the narratives of trauma represented in *YE* and *DB* internalize the features of traumatic experience in their narrative strategies – such as repetition, fragmentation, dislocation, narrative uncertainty, problematic relationship to landscape and time, overlapping of the archival/factual with the imaginary/fictional – so that the novelistic texts emerge as a perfect way out of the dilemma of how to write the history of Lebanon without getting entangled in the meshes of partisan sectarianism.

Rabee Jaber is a prolific, award-winning, Arabic-language Lebanese writer born in Beirut in 1972 as a member of the Druze community of Lebanon – a minority group that has always "played an important role"<sup>5</sup> in the history of the multi-denominational state of Lebanon that is the homeland of seventeen different sects. He has always lived in Beirut, and is married to the Maronite Lebanese novelist Rene Hayek. Jaber has published 18 novels up-to-date, as well as his journalistic work as "editor of *Afaq (Horizons)*, the weekly cultural supplement of *al-Hayat* daily

newspaper".<sup>6</sup> Born on the eve of the Lebanese Civil War (1975 – 1990), Jaber started his writing career in the immediate aftermath of the war, with his first novel *The Master of Darkness (Sayyed al-Atma)* – a novel about the 1916 famine that hit the Druze community of Mount Lebanon – published in 1992. "*The Master of Darkness* won the Critics Choice Prize of 1992",<sup>7</sup> which is also the year when Jaber graduated from the American University of Beirut with a degree in physics.<sup>8</sup> In 2009, Jaber "was selected as one of the 39 best young Arab authors under the age of 40 by the Beirut39 Hay Festival project",<sup>9</sup> and several of his works were acknowledged by literary awards; his novel *Amerika* (2010) – narrating the story of Levantine immigrants to the New World – was shortlisted for the 2010 IPAF, *The Druze of Belgrade* (2011), one of the two works to be discussed in the following pages, won the 2012 IPAF as mentioned above, and his 2011 novel *The Birds of Holiday Inn*, narrating the fates of the dwellers of an apartment building in Beirut during the Civil War, was on the longlist of IPAF 2013.

History, whether familial, communal, or national, occupies centre-stage in all Jaber's novels, and it is always a history of trauma: Max Weiss claims that "history and memory are central to the writing of Rabee Jaber";<sup>10</sup> in a similar vein, David J. Wrisley writes that, "one theme that stands out among the many literary topics [Jaber] treats is that of the distress and alienation of people amid the fateful workings of human history" (99).<sup>11</sup> War trauma (and ironically, in the case of Beirut, postwar reconstruction trauma as will be discussed later) plays a major role in Jaber's life and work, a fact that calls to be read in the light of his declaration that, to him, writing is basically a response to "an overwhelmingly persistent internal need",<sup>12</sup> and that reading and writing are his "sole means to achieve psychological balance".<sup>13</sup> Significantly, the Lebanese Civil War is coupled with the event of Jaber's birth in one sentence at the beginning of an interview published in the cultural supplement of *Al-Ittihad* newspaper of Abu Dhabi. Jaber says: "I was born in Beirut in 1972 at a small hospital that was later erased during the War. It used to be near the National Museum, but after 1975, the whole district became part of the infamous Green Line that divided Beirut into two warring cities, East Beirut and West Beirut, for the following 15 years."<sup>14</sup> Jaber recounts how in 1989, the year when he joined the AUB, the war suddenly came to an end, "as if I were living in a

magic world; I suddenly found myself living in a new city, the bulldozers worked day and night removing the rubble and erasing whole buildings; massive reconstruction work transformed the two warring cities into an ultramodern metropolis with high-rise buildings, malls, and a flourishing tourist business."<sup>15</sup> Wrisley argues that, Jaber's novels "crystallize at moments in a lifetime of self-engagement with both family and national history" (100). The "family" reference here is to the "obscure pasts and fragmented stories" of some of Jaber's ancestors that keep appearing in his novels and to whom he has alluded in the above-mentioned *Ittihad* interview. The "disappearance" of these ancestors is enmeshed with the history of the decline and subsequent persecution of the Druze community in nineteenth-century Ottoman Beirut and Mount Lebanon, thus positing their narratives within a context of communal as well as familial trauma.

Almost all of Jaber's novels have been engaged with the history of Lebanon, whether the immediate or ancient history. For example, recent historical catastrophe is evoked in Jaber's *The Mehlis Report*,<sup>16</sup> written in the aftermath of the assassination of the Lebanese premier Rafik Hariri, and dealing with the United Nations committee headed by the German Judge Detlev Mehlis arriving to Beirut to investigate the assassination. The protagonist is Saman Yarid, an architect who runs a declining family business (Yarid Architecture and Design Agency) in postwar Beirut, and who is engaged in some business with Solidere, the multinational corporation headed by Rafik Hariri and engaged in reconstructing Beirut's Central District as will be discussed later. As applies to Jaber's fiction in general, space and time are of paramount importance in *The Mehlis Report*; Max Weiss writes that, "minor characters float in and out of [Saman Yarid's] life, but it is the city of Beirut itself – its physicality, its ghosts, its wreckage – that remains his primary interlocutor".<sup>17</sup> Another novel set in the near past is Jaber's *Ralph Rizqallah in the Looking Glass*<sup>18</sup> which investigates the motives behind the suicide of "Rizqallah (1950 – 1995), a professor of psychology at the Lebanese University and a regular contributor to *Al-Mulhaq*, the cultural supplement published by the daily *Al-Nahar*"(97).<sup>19</sup> The tragic death of Rizqallah has sparked anger among many Lebanese writers who, according to Zeina

Halabi, "codified [the intellectual] within a structure of symbols that render him a valuable member of his community due to his ability to protect and salvage its lost memory" (26). Halabi refers here to the antagonism of many intellectuals during the 1990s to Solidere's reconstruction projects backed by the Lebanese government – an issue that will be discussed in detail in the following pages. Significantly, Halabi makes a marked distinction between the position of these intellectuals led by Elias Khoury who chose to mourn the death of Rizqallah as the public loss of one of the guardians who resisted "the systematic process of erasing the memory of the war and silencing counter-narratives about war events" (25), and the position adopted by Jaber in *Ralph Rizqallah*: "Jaber redefines Ralph not as a messianic figure or as an agent of mourning, but as a lone, secluded, and marginal writer disengaged from the burden of the dominant intellectual discourse", Halabi argues; "The intellectual is therefore not objectified as a site of memory, but instead humanized as a man consumed by a personal narrative of loss and disillusionment" (129). Halabi concludes that,

Despite Jaber's disengagement from the prevalent discourse about the role of the public intellectual, he nevertheless presented a new conceptualization of the political. Political commitment in Jaber's narrative discourse emanated not from a commitment to a masternarrative about war and collective memory, but rather from a return to the narrative text as the sole source of meaning. (165)

Halabi's claim regarding the complex relation between fiction and history in Jaber's novels is in line with the argument of Wrisley in his study of Jaber's *Amerika*, as well as the argument of Kamal Salibi, the prominent Lebanese historian whose article "Beirut and Time" is quoted by Wrisley. Salibi argues that Jaber's narrative art resembles Lavoisier's Law of the Conservation of Mass: "nothing of the past is gained or lost, rather everything is always changing" (77),<sup>20</sup> adding that Jaber's "past-present (or present-past)" is a space in which the imaginative dimension of narrative combines with the "scientific discipline" of the historian in a state of constant tension (79).

Similarly, Wrisley writes that:

Jaber's deep concern with history, the ways he constructs

narratives about the past and simultaneously deconstructs them, poin[t] to a strong ambivalence about the power of historical narrative in the present. On the one hand, digging into the archive for tales of a national [and familial] past is fascinating to Jaber. On the other hand, his novel *Amerika* is permeated with reflective uncertainty about narrating migration. (101)

Jaber's fiction engages with ancient history of Beirut as exemplified by his novel *Berytus: An Underground City* (2005), given that Berytus is the ancient name of Beirut during Phoenician times. The focus on the underground as a locus is highly significant in Jaber's oeuvre as will be mentioned in the discussion of *DB*. History is also evoked in his three-volume novel *Beirut, City of the World* (2003 – 2007), where Jaber "traces Beirut's evolution, by way of one elite family's history, from a small port city in the early nineteenth century to the cosmopolitan capital of the present."<sup>21</sup> Wrisley argues that, "the halting complexity of a fragmented and scattered Lebanese past and its transformation into literature are clearly articulated in Jaber's oeuvre, but nowhere more clearly than in the narrative frame of *Beirut: City of the World*" (103).

Significantly, Lebanese historiography is a highly-charged and contested field of discourse in which contrasting and mutually-exclusive narratives are continually being produced by historians coming from different sectarian backgrounds and supporting different political agendas. In "Between Authenticity and Alienation" (2009), Yusri Hazran<sup>22</sup> argues plausibly that Lebanon still lacks a universally-accepted historical narrative - a "consensual" and "unifying" narrative that is accepted by the Lebanese population in general, and by the Druze and Maronites (the two long-standing historical rivals) in particular. According to Hazran, the Druze of Lebanon claim to be the original founders of Lebanon as a separate entity in the Middle East, and reject the Maronite historical narrative which they describe as "ideologically motivated, sectarian and fabricated". Hazran argues that since the 1980s there has been a steady increase in the number of works produced by Lebanese Druze intellectuals – in response to a call to action made by the leader Kamal Jumblatt – that aim to produce a counternarrative that highlights the part played by this influential

minority. In *The Druze Community and the Lebanese State: Between Confrontation and Reconciliation*,<sup>23</sup> Hazran expands on this "phenomenon", stating that:

Since the early 1980s, the Druze intelligentsia has been assiduous in rewriting Lebanese history. Not only professional historians, but also intellectuals, journalists, writers, and political leaders, have taken part. ... Druze cultural and community institutions have diligently published historical essays focusing on the era of the medieval Druze emirate, a trend spearheaded by the progressive party's publishing house, al-Dar al-Taqadumiyah. (241)

This medieval Druze Emirate signifies what Kamal Jumblatt called an "ideal situation" which, Hazran explains, "prevailed for several hundred years under the Druze Emirate ... The Lebanon of that period had no ethnic or religious strife. Christians enjoyed complete freedom of religion, and participated fully in political and social life" (245). The Druze narrative counterpoises this "enlightened stage of Lebanon's history, [that] was ended by the Maronites' sudden rise to power [around the mid-nineteenth century]", against that "other [present-day] Lebanon ... of confessionalism and fanaticism – the antithesis of the true Lebanon" (245). The Druze narrative sees the Peasants' Revolt of 1840 – 1860 and the concomitant "evil plots" of Emir Bashir (who had secretly converted to Christianity and received support from his Western allies) as a turning point in the social, economic, and cultural circumstances that culminated in the downfall of Druze feudalism. (247)

Hazran argues that the call to rewrite the history of Lebanon initiated by Kamal Jumblatt is still thriving as his son Walid Jumblatt (the present leader of the Druze community in Lebanon) follows in the footsteps of the father and recounts "the falsification of history" as one of "the many sins of the Maronites"(248).

It would be tempting to posit the two novels under study in the context of the above-mentioned "need" to engage with history by the Druze-origin Jaber, given that Kamal Salibi in "Rabee Jaber and *Yusef al-Ingilizi*" has vouched for the historical accuracy of Jaber's fiction, commenting on what he termed the "baffling" amount of "historical knowledge"(673) involved in the making of the novel,



describing *YE* as, "a study of the subtle complexities of the social character of the Druze mountains ... tersely sketched out in elegant parables and vignettes" (680). The historical authenticity of *YE* is evidenced by the conformity of its depicted social scene to the description provided by K. Salibi in *A House of Many Mansions*,<sup>24</sup> where Lebanon is described as "a unique phenomenon in the Arab world of Ottoman times, ... a country where special social rather than political conditions prevailed" (163). Salibi mentions three major social entities in Ottoman Lebanon: A Druze mountain community so confident of its tribal solidarity that it had no reservations about having Christians living in its midst in steadily increasing numbers, and in the full enjoyment of religious and social liberties; A Christian community maintaining strong ties with Western Europe; and a harbour town, Beirut, whose population is predominantly Sunni Muslims, in contrast to the Christian / Druze populations of the mountains surrounding it. It is exactly this social milieu that the reader meets in the world of *YE*.

However, it is necessary to make a highly significant qualification before one ventures to read Jaber's historical fiction as an answer to Jumblatt's call, which is, that instead of the flourishing medieval "era of the Druze Emirate", the two novels are set within the traumatic and turbulent years that have witnessed the fall of the Druze feudalism and the marginalization of their role in Lebanese history. Moreover, it is noteworthy that whereas the protagonist and titular character of *YE* is a member of the Druze community of Mount Lebanon, the main (and titular) character of *DB* is a Christian from Beirut. And although the worlds of both novels teem with vivid details about the culture of that enigmatic Druze sect that may come as a revelation to many readers, and although the historical frame of both works relates to major catastrophes in Druze history, it would be totally unjustifiable to pin down the novels to the context of narrow sectarian or even national historical concerns, at the peril of ignoring the compelling and near-epic scope of their thematic, spatial, and temporal dimensions. The present paper contends that, rather than catering to any political agenda, Jaber's treatment of history in the two novels under study (and in his work in general), is more in line with Cathy Caruth's argument in *Unclaimed Experience*,<sup>25</sup> that historical memory is "always a matter of

distortion, a filtering of the original event through the memories of traumatic repression" (15), and that "history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (24). Caruth defines 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" (11). It is this definition of trauma, which is applicable across a wide range of situations such as war, physical and psychological abuse, and genocide, that informs Jaber's historical novels. By representing the inextricable bonds of suffering that run across different sects of the Lebanese population, Jaber's work re-instates how literary discourse, with its ability to penetrate to the truth regardless of the degree of factual accuracy or the lack thereof, is more capable of representing history than other types of "fact-oriented" discourse. Thus, trauma narratives are employed to overcome the impasse of historiography as will be discussed in this paper.

A quick review of the controversy concerning the post-war reconstruction of Beirut – that city that Jaber "keeps returning to [in his novels], and the place that has inspired ... his sharpest writing", as Robyn Creswell claims in his review of the English translation (2013) of Jaber's *The Mehlis Report* (2006) – would be relevant to the context of any study of Jaber's fiction of trauma, given that this act of reconstruction has, ironically, inflicted a fresh trauma on the psyche of a large section of the Lebanese population. Several architects, archaeologists, urban planners, sociologists, and novelists – Elias Khoury being the most vociferous among them – fuelled the critique against the state-sponsored rebuilding project of Beirut's ravaged downtown/centre-ville undertaken by Solidere, whose promotional literature presented the motto of "Beirut: Ancient City of the Future", offering a "30-year Master Plan (1994 – 2024)" – to use Craig Larkin's<sup>26</sup> term – for the reconstruction of "a global tourist commercial centre, replete with beautifully restored churches and mosques, gardens and Roman ruins".<sup>27</sup> A case in point is The Garden of Forgiveness (Hadiqat As-Samah) which Solidere presented as "a paragon of social integration" that would offer "an important neutral location with a multicommunal history" and would serve as "a meeting point for Lebanon's many communities"(qtd in Vloeberghs 16).<sup>28</sup>

The opposite camp, spearheaded by Khoury, rejected this vision. In "Memory of the City",<sup>29</sup> Khoury writes: "The huge machine that is reconstructing and regenerating the City is already wiping out the memory of Old Beirut, relentlessly tossing the rubble of the old city into the sea. The city's centre today is *an empty space, a placeless space, a hole in memory* [my emphasis]" (138). The vision exemplified by Khoury entails a shift of emphasis from the physical spatial landmarks that were being erased daily by the bulldozers to the symbolic space constructed within narratives and archives of remembrance. It is worth mentioning that space is one of the main preoccupations of Jaber's fiction, and that space manipulation is one of the major tools of trauma narratives as attested by the arguments of Pierre Nora, Geoffrey Hartman, and Anne Whitehead to be discussed later.

Khoury's criticism of the postwar reconstruction of Beirut's centre would fall under what Vloeberghs, in his study of the "negotiation of space" in postwar downtown Beirut, calls "a more ideological type of criticism", which is one of "two kinds of contestation" that exist against Solidere]. The other type, according to Vloeberghs, "is based on factual grounds (condemning urban annihilation and contesting ownership rights)" (16). Nabil Beyhoum<sup>30</sup> points out that, "if the objective is to transcend the war ... [then] reconstruction [should] not simply imply rebuilding but also include social processes ... it is not merely a transformation of space. Reconstruction must act to regenerate urban society" (qtd in Vloeberghs 9).

In "See You in Disneyland",<sup>31</sup> Michael Sorkin posits the above-mentioned controversy between two camps: "Spectacle city" versus "Participatory city". Whereas the latter is concordant with the vision promoted by Solidere, offering a place of reconciliation and healing of war trauma, the "Spectacle city" can serve as an embodiment of the critique of intellectuals to what they considered an attack on collective memory and archaeological heritage in the name of superficial modernization. Like Baudrillard's "simulacrum",<sup>32</sup> Sorkin's "Spectacle city" is

a city of simulations, television city, the city as theme park ... urban renewal with a sinister twist, an architectural deception [that] distances itself from fundamental realities,

... whether it represents generic historicity or generic modernity, such design is based on the same calculus as advertising, the idea of pure imageability, oblivious to the real needs or traditions of those who inhabit it. (32)

Arguably, while the above vision is not specific to postwar Beirut, and is equally applicable to any number of global postmodern megacities, in the case of Beirut it acquired traumatic status because, as Saree Makdisi argues, "the spectacle here has assumed for itself, and hence has eliminated, the function of time; it has taken on tasks and duties of history: of a history cleansed not merely of pain, but of all kinds of other feelings as well; in short it has produced a prosthetic history" (212).<sup>33</sup>

In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*,<sup>34</sup> Caruth states that in cases of trauma, "the pathology consists ... solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (4-5). Caruth's trauma model proposed in *Unclaimed Experience* emphasizes the connection between "the truth of the [traumatic] event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility" (153) as evidenced in flashback memories of survivors of trauma. "The unexpected and overwhelmingly violent events of trauma are", Caruth argues, "not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (1996: 91). Interestingly, Caruth's argument about the "truth of [trauma's] incomprehensibility" has been the aspect most criticized in the theoretical model she offers. For example, Dominick LaCapra objected to what he saw as Caruth's endorsement of a "traumatic sublime" that would seem to preclude the possibility of literary representations of trauma, claiming that: "Caruth here seems dangerously close to conflating absence [of absolute foundations and total meaning of knowledge] with loss, and even sacralizing, or making sublime, the compulsive repetition ... of a traumatic past" (121).<sup>35</sup>

However, far from accepting the plausibility of LaCapra's critique of Caruth's theoretical model, the present paper underscores a central tenet of Caruth's argument about the perfect compatibility of narratives of trauma to provide access to history. Actually, "the inherent latency of the [traumatic] event" according to Caruth, puts it

at an advantage when engaging with "the belatedness, of ... historical experience" (*Unclaimed Experience* 17). The three sequential phases which characterize the experience of trauma – namely, "event", "repression", and "return of the repressed", are seen by Caruth to provide the means through which trauma narratives are particularly suited to overcome the epistemological problems raised by poststructuralists concerning "our inability to have direct access to others', or even to our own, histories" (*Unclaimed Experience* 10). Caruth claims that narratives of trauma can offer an outlet for this poststructuralist dilemma of the impossibility of gaining access to history, insofar that, "the [belatedness of the] notion of trauma ... permits *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (*Unclaimed Experience* 11).

Caruth's repeated flashback symptom of traumatic experience is the main narrative strategy adopted by Jaber in *YE* and *DB*: both Yusef, the titular hero of *YE* and one of the ancestors of the author, and Hanna Yaaqoub, the protagonist of *DB* – an Orthodox Christian peddling egg-seller in Ottoman Beirut, suffer from a persistent recurrence of the memory of their initial traumas in the form of an obsessive flashback that turns the fact of their survival into a limbo of suffering where they keep experiencing the initial trauma again and again. Born in 1832 in the Mountain of Druze in Lebanon as the eleventh son of an influential Druze sheikh, Yusef, his family, and the two major communities of the Mountain – Druze and Maronites – get entangled in the intricate complexities and conflicting loyalties of an explosive political situation that involves a declining Ottoman Empire, interfering European Powers, an invading Egyptian army, and the machinations of Emir Bashir. It is noteworthy that, although the subtitle of *DB* reads: "The Story of Hanna Yaaqoub", this second novel is as closely involved with the history of the Druze community in the nineteenth century as *YE* is – only at a wider scope and a consecutive historical period – given that the trajectory of Hanna's life is tightly involved with the Druze community, as his originary trauma of displacement and imprisonment relates to his being present at the wrong place and the wrong time, and to his identity's being mistaken for one of the Mountain Druze, thus he is forcibly exiled along with hundreds of

Druze young men, in the aftermath of the 1860s Druze-Marionite hostilities.

Yusef's originary trauma happens when, as a child of five, he watches uncomprehendingly the ritual washing of the body of his brother Qassem who has just died in one of a series of hostilities that erupt sporadically between the Druze and Maronites:

They spread the corpse on the iron bed to wash it; Yusef stood alone under the nearby blueberry trees watching; he saw the wet white towel passed over the chest; that has been Qassem, the tall brother who used to come visiting alone, or with the other brothers, once every month or two, and give him the red-and-blue coloured sweets, and lift him high up so that he, Yusef, could touch the rusted horse-shoe fixed in the ancient stone above the house-door. When he took him down off his shoulders, Yusef would ask to touch Qassem's gun, and the gunpowder pouch, and the lighter, but Qassem would only let him touch the leather pouch of his dagger. This is Qassem, and here is the towel rising off his body stained with black and yellow and red, and going in and out of the water-filled iron pail. While his hair is washed with soap, the green-yellow cube slides down from the trembling hand to the earthen ground in front of the house. Yusef wants to come forward and pick up the cube of soap, but he seems as fixed to the ground as a tree. (35 – 6)<sup>36</sup>

The site of the initial trauma in both novels, the mountain in the case of Yusef and the seaport of Beirut in the case of Hanna, turns the place for each of them into what Pierre Nora terms "a place of memory"<sup>37</sup> in addition to its primary significance as a place of history. In the chapter entitled "Trauma and Landscape" in Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction*,<sup>38</sup> Whitehead argues plausibly that, "the notion of 'place' occupies a rich and interesting position in contemporary trauma theory, both through Geoffrey Hartman's writing on landscape and place,<sup>39</sup> and through Pierre Nora's influential formulation of 'Lieux de memoire' or 'sites of memory'" (48). Whitehead explains that Nora distinguishes,

lieux d'histoire, associated with the archive and arising from the preservation of the trace, from lieux de memoire, which are sites, material or immaterial, around which the

memory of a group or community crystallizes itself. Invested with traces of longing and belonging, lieux de memoire form part of a symbolic topography and are crucial to the formation of collective identities. (51)

Jaber's *YE* and *DB* are centrally concerned with the relation between landscape and memory, or what Whitehead terms the "evolving relation of individuals and communities to sites and the associated transmutations of memory and identity"(51). Obsessively remembering the place in front of his father's house where his brother's dead body was being washed, the trauma of the brother's sudden death – which to the uncomprehending mind of the child Yusef is bound to appear as a trauma of disappearance, and which simultaneously involves an awareness of his people's cultural practices – the adult Yusef's consciousness forges his own identity as a member of the Druze community. When the extermination of Yusef's family through a chain of natural disasters and political/economic crises forcibly dislocates Yusef from this "place of memory", and when his identity is multiply challenged in future years while living with the missionaries in Beirut and with his adopting aunt Helen in London, it is this haunting "place of memory" that prevents an absolute collapse and allows the new "Joseph Mender" to retain an identity core and to survive in a new "place of history" exemplified by the New World.

Similarly, in *DB*, the seaport of Beirut on that morning – when the happily whistling Hanna was going about his usual business carrying his baskets of boiled eggs and hoping to sell them off to the soldiers of the newly-arrived garrison at the port, only to be uncomprehendingly arrested and violently beaten up and thrown aboard the ship that will carry him away to the dungeons of the prisons of Ottoman Empire for fifteen long years – becomes the "place of memory" that will haunt him forever.

It is noteworthy that factual topography in the geographical sense of charting maps and documenting landmarks is as important in Jaber's fiction as the symbolic topography of the "lieux de memoire" mentioned above. Spending his adolescent years as a guest at one of the missionary houses of Beirut, and getting his education at the missionary school, Yusef in *YE* passes most of his time in a sort of obsessive roaming of the streets of the city, carefully

documenting all the landmarks, and persistently trying different points of view, and finally drawing a map of the city included within the text of the novel. Jaber's preoccupation with the landscape of Beirut in *YE* (as well as in other novels mentioned above) calls to be read in light of the 1990s' topographical trauma that the city suffered at the hands of Solidere. More importantly, the above-ground underground dichotomy that appears in *YE* but is much more pronounced in *DB*, can be considered as a metaphor for the multilayered historical city of Beirut that has been masked and mutilated by the superficiality of the postmodern glittering metropolis. Creswell writes that,

Solidere began its work by razing most of the district to the ground, uncovering in the process a mille-feuille of archaeological strata from Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Arab, and Ottoman Beirut. Ten years later a glittering new town stood in place of the old. So the double-vision that Jaber gives his characters and readers – the ability to see specters of the past behind the solid structures of the present – is a symptom of the vast and sudden transformation Beirut has undergone since the end of the War.

It is this "double vision" that Jaber refers to in his BBC interview where he says that from 1992 to 1995 he has been "living in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Beirut", spending whole days doing research in the basement floor of the Library of AUB, reading the archives of Ottoman newspapers, notably *Lesan-al-Hal*, so that when he got up to the streets he would be amazed to see "horseless carriages moving everywhere".<sup>40</sup>

The spatial dimension of both texts is represented through leitmotifs: a bird's-eye view in *YE* and an above-ground – underground dichotomy in *DB*. The leitmotifs are intensely wrapped up with the traumatized consciousness of both protagonists. Yusef is the predominant "focalizer" (the character through whose eyes the scenes are represented to the reader to use Miki Bal's term)<sup>41</sup> throughout most of *YE*; the aerial view (from mountain tops, buildings' roofs, ship masts, minarets, church towers) with its cartographical orientation, is the vision of a mountain-dweller who, though displaced from one house to another and one continent to another for a lifetime, has internalized his homeland worldview and



carried it with him wherever he goes. It is an all-encompassing vision that is represented in one episode by the vision of an elephant being dismantled from the top of a steamer at an English port, looking away towards the far distance and including both India and England in one glance. This bird's-eye view has connotations with cartography and the imperial enterprise of re-drawing the map of the world. In its sensitivity to colours and shapes it becomes the aesthetic vision of Yusef, the natural-born artist whose true-to-life spontaneous drawings are, ironically, always in black-and-white, denoting the core of human experience. Arguably, the art of painting, which eludes Yusef's grasp despite the years of study at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, stands for the imposed marks of differentiation between different races of a basically identical humanity, like the artificial colours of a map. The art of Yusef is that of a "wood engraver" – the job for which he seems to have been born and at which he excels for years in London's top illustrated magazine, *Punch*. Wood-engraving is an art that "traces outlines of figures and shapes by pencil on paper, then engraves them, using a chisel, on a special mould of wood, to be used later in printing the illustrations in paper publications" (247 – 253).<sup>42</sup> Rather than representing the rich colours of the Nature of his childhood Mountain, or the sophisticated colour schemes of the Dutch and Italian painters of the Renaissance hanging in the drawing rooms of the British and American Consulates of his teenage Beirut, Yusef's art opts for representing the morphological features of objects in a minimalist mode that reproduces their bare outline without embellishment.

The dichotomy of underground and above-ground locations that presides over the spatial dimension of *DB* is closely related to the chain of traumas that "uncannily" hits the life of Hanna (and others). This coincides with the pattern of inexplicably persistent suffering described by Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* as,

the uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them ... These repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected,

and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control. (1-2)

After the death of his father – a man who lived and died in an underground inferno with his family, stoking up the fires of the big furnace under the public baths in Beirut in order to keep the bath water satisfactorily hot to cater to the luxury of the bathing customers above – Hanna<sup>43</sup> absolutely rejects the offer to “inherit” his father’s position. In an ecstasy of freedom, Hanna builds a tiny one-roomed house on the tiny piece of land his father has left him adjacent to the Catholic Church of Mar-Gerges, becomes an egg-vendor wandering jauntily in the alleys of Beirut with his two baskets, gets married, and has a daughter. The doll-house of Hanna and family, with its one room, mini water fountain, sunny-airy bit of garden where the chicken and the crawling baby jumble together, becomes a picture of Edenic bliss, haunting Hanna’s memory during his long dark years of exile. However, Hanna is thrown out of this paradise, and displaced, for what seems like eternity, to distant places, apparently without committing any sin, original or otherwise. In a seemingly endless nightmare, Hanna passes through a succession of claustrophobic underground places that embody an inferno as sinister as that suffered by his father. From the belly of a ship, to one dungeon after another in the many underground prisons of the Ottoman Empire, to the war trenches of battles at the frontiers, Hanna’s trauma setting is always the belly of the earth. The intermittent and brief periods when Hanna and his “brothers”, the Druze of Belgrade, are taken above ground and made to slave in the fields of the Pasha (tied together with massive chains), become times of freedom to be cherished and missed by the dungeon-inmates. And the two instances when the prisoners are given permission to reconstruct some dilapidated stables in Belgrade and two farming houses in Bulgaria, to dwell there and work the fields, reporting to the authorities weekly, become synonymous with paradise indeed. However, these brief periods of “living”, only punctuate the eternal fact of “burial”. Arguably, those underground masses that fill up the pages of *DB* are “salt of the earth” in the Biblical sense that refers to “those of great worth and reliability”, and to the majority of the populations of the Third World nowadays.

Caruth's "chain of trauma" pattern is similarly evoked by the series of catastrophic events hitting Yusef, his family, and his

community: <sup>44</sup>he loses ten of his brothers, nine of whom die in military operations that are imposed on them by the political actualities of the times; the tenth brother, called "Yusef the First", dies with his wife and newly-born twins, when a thunderbolt sets their thatch roof on fire and collapses their house during a mountain snowstorm. Snowstorms and heat waves periodically hit the Mountain playing havoc with the livelihood of its inhabitants. Moreover, when a grown-up Yusef returns to the Mountain from England in the late 1850s, attempting yet a new beginning to his life, this time as a farmer, he achieves remarkable success in his agricultural enterprise for two seasons, then, catastrophe hits again. A heat wave causes generalized crop failures throughout the Mountain villages, leaving the fields "dry" and "dead": "Looking at the fields, [Yusef] sees a sea of yellow. Only yesterday it has been a sea of vivid green. The cruelty of this scene is indescribable" (338).

The history of Mary, Yusef's English wife, widens the scope of the victims of the novel's narratives of trauma to include the working classes of Manchester, in the same manner as Yusef's friendship with his neighbor at the summer cottage of Hampstead, introduces the traumatic narrative of Irish history into the novel's plot. Even British Aunt Helen, with her upper-middle-class lifestyle in London, surrounded by the imperial trophies brought from India and China among other places where her late husband has spent a fulfilling career in the construction of lighthouses, has in a sense lost all her family to that omnipotent entity, the British Empire. Aunt Helen is so lonely that she welcomes the chance to semi-adopt Yusef, the orphan Druze boy who has been living with her sister's missionary family in Beirut, to offer him a new life as Joseph Mender – a translation of Yusef Jaber's name – and to help him become a British citizen studying at the prestigious Westminster College and living at her house. It is noteworthy that Jaber's treatment of colonial encounters in both novels adopts an all-encompassing viewpoint towards human history in general and colonialism in particular, highlighting the constructive as well as exploitative/destructive aspects of empire-building, and refraining from one-sided indictments or valorizations, thus prescribing an acceptance of interconnectedness and mutual tolerance as the only means of coexisting on planet earth.

On the other hand, while both novels highlight the inextricable bonds of tension between "lieux d'histoire" and "lieux de memoire" as one of the features of their historical narratives of trauma, it is only in *DB* that we come across Geoffrey Hartman's "non-place". Whitehead explains how Hartman considers that "one of the key aspects of Wordsworth's originality lies in his conversion of place into 'memory place', so that specific sites and landscapes create a temporal consciousness" (49). However, Whitehead points out that,

Hartman questions whether the Wordsworthian 'memory places' can be connected to the sites of Holocaust suffering. the concentration camps are clearly fixed in the imagination of survivors and so seem to be related to Wordsworth's constructions, but Hartman resists this identification [on the basis that] survivor accounts often recollect the deportation to a 'non-place' (reinforced by their transportation across long distances). (49)

The present study contends that Hanna's vague though recurrent recollections of the long journey inside the belly of the ship across the Mediterranean, and in the dungeons of the Castle of Belgrade are recollections of what to him is bound to remain a "non-place" marked by sensory deprivation and severe physical as well as psychological trauma. In this "non-place",

darkness was an absolute and continuous punishment. Even at meal time, no light entered ... rather, a slightly less dense darkness was introduced as the door opened to bring in two wooden pails filled with indifferent soup, then darkness soon prevailed as the iron lock was fastened once more. The only exception to this reign of darkness was the pale candlelight that showed the way to the two slaves employed once daily to remove the prisoners' excreta from the 'pit'. At one such time, Hanna could see the tightly packed bodies of the men covering up the ground without a single face being visible among them. Crown hair and facial hair got entangled together in one amorphous mass that ate up the prisoners' features, making their faces all but invisible. (40 – 41)<sup>45</sup>

Another recollection of a "non-place" occurs at the beginning of the novel and is repeated verbatim after 200 pages. The

present tense is used conspicuously by the narrator to highlight the recurrent pattern of narratives of trauma:

I am startled out of my sleep by the thundering noise and the quaking earth. Where am I? In the dungeons of Herzegovina? In the underground cells of the Castle of Belgrade? Heavy iron chains manacle me to the ground; however, I find myself stretching my neck out, as if I am going to shout my peddler's cry as I used to do in the good old days in my faraway country: "Eggs! Eggs! Boiled Eggs!" Above me, on the surface of the earth, crowded feet are running, shouts are mingling, and the terrible pounding makes me imagine a hoard of prehistoric gigantic monsters fleeing, falling down, then ultimately dying. A terrible roar fills up the space, and I can smell burning flesh... (9, 209)<sup>46</sup>

It is arguable that whereas the two novels share several categories of trauma such as war, exile, and loss of loved ones, the protagonist of *DB* is physically subjected to severe life-endangering bodily trauma that places him on the brink of death on several occasions, and makes him an eye-witness to the violent death of others, to the extent that his survival appears as a miracle to him as well as to the readers. On the other hand, Yusef in *YE* undergoes repeated emotional deprivation and psychological trauma, but is not physically exposed to life-threatening violence or deprivation from the necessities of life. Thus, the concept of "non-place" is absent from the traumatic recollections of Yusef but present in the tortured mind of Hanna.

In *Trauma Fiction*, Whitehead foregrounds movement and displacement to be among the key features of the genre. Analysing the trauma fiction of W.G. Sebald, whom she describes as "one of the key writers of contemporary trauma fiction ... A German, born in the shadow of the Third Reich, Sebald grew up haunted by an unspeakable sense of collective shame" (117) – Whitehead writes that most characters in Sebald's novels are "caught in the processes of movement and displacement; they are immigrating, emigrating, or in exile ... Sebald is primarily concerned with the sense of loss which migration inevitably entails, ... the displacement that Sebald charts in his novels also affects the natural species," (118).

Stories of displacement fill up the pages of Jaber's two novels under study, for, not only are the two protagonists of *YE* and *DB* displaced from the Levant to Europe via a ship across the Mediterranean (in a journey reminiscent of the Middle Passage of the New World slave trade in the case of Hanna Yaaqoub), but also there are multitudinous populations that fill up the worlds of both novels with a dizzying flow of many-directional and multi-purpose displacements. For example, in *YE*, the “black men” who appear in Mount Lebanon in the summer of 1832 shortly before Yusef’s birth and cause a fright to his mother turn out to be soldiers in the “Egyptian” army of Ibrahim Pasha, forcibly recruited and displaced from their native land of Sudan, and sent to fight in Greece and the Levant to achieve Mohammad Ali Pasha’s dream of empire-building to be ruled by his newly-founded dynasty. An empire dream of a different sort, sponsored by Boghos the Greek, initiates the displacement of several women from Afghanistan, Sudan, Armenia, and Egypt and their re-settlement in Beirut to run a series of brothels headed by “Queen Mahasen”, thus transforming Beirut into the “Paris of the Orient”. The thriving business of Mahasen and “her girls” caters to the pressing needs of a clientele composed mainly of Circassian, Albanian, and Turkish officers of the Ottoman army, displaced from their hometowns in pursuit of a rewarding military career, and obliged to leave behind their families, in compliance with army regulations. Displacement is not necessarily forced: one instance of voluntary displacement is that motivated by religion; Protestant American missionaries arrive in Beirut in 1800, and later in Mount Lebanon where they are welcomed by the Druze community as bearers of educational opportunities for their children, while viewed with suspicion by the Maronite Church for fear of suspected proselytizing activities. The role played by these missionaries in Lebanese culture in general and Yusef’s life in particular informs large sections of the novel. Far from being one-directional, the missionary influence is shown to be mutual, with the conversion of the priest Shepherd Senior to Islam, and the assimilation of the physician-Biblical scholar-missionary Van Dyke to an oriental lifestyle that causes him to be mistaken for an Arab on more than one occasion. The sons and daughters of the British Empire (in this case exemplified by Aunt Helen – Yusef’s guardian in London) are scattered all over the globe, serving in imperial

outposts in India, Australia, South Africa, and the Americas.

Displacement thrives as a key feature of the human condition in *DB* as well: the streets of Beirut are crowded with the displaced Maronites forced to flee their villages in Mount Lebanon in the aftermath of the violent clashes of the 1860s between Druze and Maronites; the Druze of the Mountain, on the other hand, cross the borders to Hawran to escape the punitive expedition co-manned by Ottoman and European forces; later these Druze fighters will return to face punishment in order to spare their families from mass retaliation, and they will be sentenced to exile in Belgrade. The displacement of these men is encoded in the oxymoronic title of the novel, itself a sign of the entangled power relations of East and West: the name "Druze of Belgrade" is coined by the London newspapers and later adopted by the Ottoman government, in a clear indication of how the High Porte takes its cue from the British metropolis. Further examples of displacement motif in *DB* include: the ongoing stream of displaced populations, deployed armies, and recruited prisoners across the vast Euro-Asian territory of the Ottoman Empire, and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca with multiple tributaries of pilgrims of diverse ethnicities joining the mainstream procession year after year.

The other side of the coin of displacement is disappearance: from the viewpoint of family and friends, Yusef disappears from the Mountain when he makes a sudden and secret decision to go to the New World; similarly Hanna's wife and his baby daughter have to go through life bearing the trauma of Hanna's mysterious disappearance. Apart from the link to some ancestors of Rabee Jaber who "disappeared", this motif bears a profound link to the Druze faith. The theme of prolonged and mysterious disappearance/absence followed by return to one's people is known as "ghayba" or disappearance of Imam, and is one of the essential tenets of Druze doctrine. Philip Hitti argues that the "hidden imam idea"<sup>47</sup> was adopted and elaborated by several extremist sects of Shi'ism before the onset of Druzism; most notable among these hidden-imam sects was the Ismailiyya sect (of whom the Druze are an offshoot). The psychological basis of this doctrine, according to Hitti, lies in "the strong but unfulfilled desires and hopes of a persecuted and depressed people (as the Shia were under the Umayyads and

‘Abbasids) with the supreme ambition of a savior-leader whose coming shall usher in for them a new era of liberty and prosperity’ (31). Hitti points out the close connection between the Druze’s incarnational theory of the divinity of al-Hakim – the Fatimide Caliph in Egypt (996 – 1021) – and the hidden imam concept, since the immortal divine nature of al-Hakim explains the mystery of his disappearance one night in 1021 A.D. during his usual night promenade in Cairo, as a reversion to his divine non-human form.

At one level, the two novels under study can be read as documentation of traumatic chapters in the history of the Druze community in the second half of the nineteenth century. As mentioned above, the novels are supported by a high degree of historical factual accuracy that informs the imaginative component in highly evocative and enriching ways. In "The Voice of Writing and the Dawn of History",<sup>48</sup> Faisal Darraj uses the term "the power of the archive" in his discussion of Jaber's meticulous historical research and the use of real documents in the texts of Jaber's novels. Applying this argument to the two novels under discussion, the present study traces a mounting sophistication of technique. In the earlier novel, the documentation process takes the form of footnotes, narrative digressions, and intrusive authorial commentaries, whereas the archival aspect of the later novel is implicitly integrated within the events of the plot, the collapsing chronology, and the fragmented episodic structure that reflects the structure of historical trauma.

The manipulation of the narrative point of view in both texts is of paramount relevance to the technique of insertion of archival/historical material. The narrator of *YE* is a third-person omniscient narrator whose level of detachment alternates between extremes, positing him at times in the status of a detached scholarly chronicler and commentator, and in contrast, plunging him sometimes deep into the consciousness of the protagonist, so that narrator and protagonist nearly merge into each other. As chronicler, the narrator engages with the documentary aspect of this primarily fictional text. A case in point is the following footnote in which the narrator gives background information to explain Yusef’s time in Beirut as a guest of missionary families and a student at the American missionary school:

Historically, the close relationship between the Druze and the Americans started during the period of the Egyptian



rule (1832 – 1840): some of the Druze of Beirut converted to Christianity and were baptized by American Protestant missionaries to evade conscription into the Egyptian army. Moreover, Prince Bashir II of Mount Lebanon harboured hostile feelings against both Druze and Americans, a fact that has caused them to become allies under the same banner. (107)<sup>49</sup>

Conversely, the narrator often plunges deep into the consciousness of Yusef to the extent of near-total identification through the various instances of free indirect speech that give the readers an almost unmediated glimpse into the workings of Yusef's mind. The following quotation offers the reader a direct glimpse into the ennui and boredom of the naturally talented artist, Yusef, during his first years as a student at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, where he studied from 1849 till 1853:

Can't he skip the first three years and pass immediately to the School of Painting? Why does he need the lessons of anatomy?! All these maps of the human body, the drawings of animal muscles, the lines of a thigh or an arm, the tendon of a neck, the arch of a foot, the slight roundness of an abdomen, does he really need an instructor to show him these things? One look is enough to imprint all these lines in his mind, his eye, his hand even! (240)<sup>50</sup>

This telescoping technique that continually varies the distance between narration and the central consciousness of the novel mimics the nature of the belated comprehension of traumatic experience, giving the impression that it is a case of split consciousness that often finds it necessary to digress into historical textbooks, maps, and manuscripts in an attempt to make comprehensible the “uncanny” chain of traumatic events described by Caruth.

Interestingly, the third-person narrator who continues the narrative after the final disappearance of Yusef is briefly replaced in the final pages of the novel by a first-person narrator who is ambiguously identical with the author himself, highlighting the semi-autobiographical nature of the novel as a Jaber family saga with Yusef as one of Rabee's ancestors. The following quotation is a qualified translation of the novel's final lines:

Yusef's gold watch, a gift presented to him by Aunt Helen in London a century and a half ago, became a family heirloom passing from one generation to another across the years. After the Independence, *my* grandfather became a sergeant in the Lebanese police force; he was married at that time, and had seven boys – *my* father being one of them – and five girls. After grandpa's death in 1983, *my* father inherited his gold watch, the watch of Yusef the Englishman [emphasis added]. (374)<sup>51</sup>

Another documentation technique in *YE* is the lengthy narratives of family and communal history offered by the family patriarch, Sheikh Ibrahim, to his son. A case in point is the story of the origins of Jaber's family line whose impressive genealogy extends back nearly a thousand years. The father's account accords with the account of the origins of the Druze cited in Paul Walker's recent biography entitled *The Caliph of Cairo: Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996 – 1021)*.<sup>52</sup> Walker refers to the origins of the Druze as an extremist offshoot of the Ismai'li Shi'ite sect, itself an extremist offshoot of mainstream Shi'ism. Basing his argument on the writings of contemporaneous medieval historians such as Al-Kirmani's *Glad Tidings of the Good News* (c.1017), and Al-Naysaburi's *Proof of the Imamate* (c.1017 – 1021), as well as the canonical nineteenth-century text of the French orientalist Silvestre de Sacy *Expose de La Religion des Druzes* (1838), Walker argues that the Druze first went public with their claim about the divinity of Al-Hakim around 1017, a claim that was considered as “a heresy” against and “a challenge” to the authority of the mainstream Ismaili doctrines. Walker cites three leaders of the emerging Druze sect around the year 1016: al-Akhram, who “was the first to promote those doctrines that subsequently developed in the writings of Hamza [bin Ali, the second leader] into the Druze movement” (253); the third is Abu-Abdullah al-Bukhari Anushtakin al-Darazi, whose name provides the origin of the name of the sect. Walker cites the history of al-Maqrizi concerning the fate of the three leaders: al-Akhram was killed by an angry Cairene mob in retaliation for the heresy of the divinity of Al-Hakim in 1019; Hamza, the writer of *The Epistles* (that constitute the Sacred Book of Wisdom of the Druze and that was the book Yusef in *YE* kept and read throughout his multiple displacements), went into self-exile in Hijaz; and al-Darazi, about whose fate there are two

conflicting reports in al-Maqrizi. One version is that Darazi was executed by al-Hakim. The other version, which is the one in concordance with future events – and inevitably the one authorized by Sheikh Ibrahim's narrative in the novel,<sup>53</sup> states that Darazi fled to Wadi-Taym (in modern-day Lebanon), where his call thrived among the local tribes.

In *DB*, historical facts are integrated within the text of the novel in a much more homogenous way in comparison to *YE*. Footnotes and lengthy digressions are absent from the text. The narrative point of view is constantly alternating between a predominant third-person limited-omniscient narrator who privileges the consciousness of the protagonist Hanna Yaaqoub, and a first-person narrator who represents the inner voice of Hanna. The abruptly staggering shifts of narrative voice in *DB*, in addition to its fragmented episodic structure, support a reading of the whole text as a fictional testimony of the events of 1860 in Lebanon, and the forced displacement that followed, given mostly by one of the victims, with the occasional intervention of another voice, who may be an empathetic listener or a knowledgeable commentator. Whatever historical knowledge the reader gains is represented mostly implicitly through the effect of the turbulent times on the life of Hanna Yaaqoub and his Druze "brothers", and rarely explicitly, through the empathetic listener cum narrator mentioned above, as well as within the substance of short and fragmentary conversations exchanged between the characters.

The narrative strategy of post-trauma testimony employed by *DB* complies with both the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and with the features of testimony given by trauma theorists such as Felman, Laub, and Langer. In "Trauma and Memory Studies",<sup>54</sup> Anne Whitehead posits trauma studies as "a subset of the broader field of memory studies", relating the emergence of trauma studies in the late twentieth century to "the official recognition of PTSD by The American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* of 1980". This recognition was related to the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and the attempts of the medical authorities to deal with the "traumatic symptomatology" of the returning soldiers. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth writes:

PTSD reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control. As such, PTSD seems to provide the most direct link between the psyche and external violence and to be the most destructive psychic disorder ... Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. (58)

As previously mentioned, the plot of *DB* is made up of a chain of life-threatening physical and psychological trauma which Hanna survives every time, but whose serious destructiveness is bound to leave a permanent imprint on his body and mind. Hanna Yaaqoub qualifies as a candidate par excellence to a medical diagnosis of PTSD in a much deeper sense than Yusef does.

The novel's subtitle, "*The Story of Hanna Yaaqoub*" foregrounds the testimonial nature of the text. In the chapter entitled "Telling Tales: Trauma and Testimony" in Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction*, she argues that, "in the 1980s and 1990s, [Felman, Laub, and Langer] did much work to define the rules and conventions of the emerging genre of Holocaust literature/testimony" (33). Moreover, Felman and Daub describe testimony as "fragmented and broken in form", "composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance" (5).<sup>55</sup> Whitehead also highlights the argument of Felman and Daub that "testimony represents a joint process or event, which can only take place in the presence of an empathetic listener"(34).<sup>56</sup> This description is a perfect illustration both of the fragmentary style of narration and the dual narrative point of view embraced in *DB* as mentioned above.

Whitehead cites Langer's dissociation-related theory of testimony<sup>57</sup> proposed in his *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* to demonstrate the ways in which "trauma unsettles and disrupts traditional moral and historical accounts", arguing that "a rupture in the lives and selves of victims" is the inevitable result of the extreme conditions of the concentration camps [read Ottoman prison dungeons] so that survival embodies a "festering wound" and "a blighted convalescence"(33 – 34).<sup>58</sup> Paraphrasing Langer's argument, Whitehead adds that, "the testimonies strive towards a new form of representation, which seeks to articulate the

unprecedented reality of the camps. In collapsing chronology and refusing the coherence of closure, survivors seek to reflect their own experiences of rupture" (34).<sup>59</sup>

The present study argues that whereas both *YE* and *DB* are open-ended narratives of trauma that resist closure, the extent to which the novelistic text internalizes the above features of testimony discourse is partial in the former and absolute in the latter. This difference is directly proportional to the severity and quality of trauma involved in each case. For whereas Yusef has lost all his family members and his people have been persecuted recurrently so that he is forced repeatedly to live among strangers in a strange land, he still has an individual and communal frame of reference with which to identify. Emotional, social, and economic traumas may be difficult to deal with, but they do not necessarily destroy the core or essence of identity. On the other hand, as mentioned above in the section dealing with "non-places" of traumatic memory, Hanna Yaaqoub's trauma belongs to a different calibre from Yusef's while simultaneously sharing the common features of trauma narratives. Hanna's identity crisis is foregrounded by Jaber himself in the spring 2011 interview where he says that his main preoccupation while writing *The Druze of Belgrade* was to find answers to such questions as, "Who is Hanna Yaaqoub? Why was he subjected to all this suffering? Can one consider the world we live in to be a place of justice? And, in such a violent world as ours is now (and has always been), how much can one really take before falling under once and for all?"<sup>60</sup>

The difference mentioned in the above paragraph between the two novels is reflected in the collapsing chronology of *DB*, where the narrative strategies of repeated dreams and hallucinations, recurrent attacks of borderline states of consciousness, the seemingly endless chain of traumas, flashbacks and flash-forwards in narration that expand the time span of the novel, reign absolute, in contradistinction to *YE* where at least a semblance of the traditional linear pattern of the chronological sequence of the bildungsroman, is kept as a frame for the narrative of trauma. It is true that beneath the linear frame, *YE*'s temporal structure has features of cyclicality, thus partly mimicking the chaotic workings of the mind of a patient with PTSD. Agricultural seasonal time and the successive phases of

sericulture – the local industry that was an important base for economy for Yusef's people, preside over the Mountain sections of the novel. However, the harmonious relation between man and nature, which Bakhtin describes in *Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel*, claiming that, in agricultural communities, “human life and nature are perceived in the same categories. The seasons of the year, ages, nights and days (and their subcategories), copulation (marriage), pregnancy, ripening, old age and death: all these categorical images serve equally well to plot the course of an individual life and the life of nature;”<sup>61</sup> Bakhtin adds that, “time here is sunk deeply in the earth, implanted in it and ripening in it. Time in its course binds together the earth and the laboring hand of man”(208).<sup>62</sup> This vision is subverted and cruelly parodied in *YE* by the seasonal eruption of violence and civil war between the two neighbouring communities of mountain-dwellers – the Druze and the Maronites. Thus, instead of becoming emblems of regeneration and plenitude, the recurring seasons carry omens of death and destruction. In the urban-set sections of the novel, the Beirut day is marked by the repeated call to prayers, and in London by the clocks that abound everywhere.

On the other hand, the temporal structure of *DB* dispenses with any semblance of linearity, succumbing to the labyrinthine and the fragmentary as the order of its trauma discourse. Cyclicity is underscored by the symbolic connotations of the eggs which Hanna chooses to sell as his sole merchandise as he wanders daily among the twisting alleys of the port of Beirut, in a seemingly endless rotation to earn a living and support his family – in a similar fashion to Yusef's incessant wanderings in Beirut and London; by the Sisyphus-like chore of Hanna's father spending his life day after day in a dungeon in front of the furnace continually feeding the fire to keep the water hot for the clients of the public bath above; and by the agricultural activities of the peasants of the Balkans and their memory-evoking role which plunges the Druze exiles into homesick remembrance of their fields in the distant lands of Mount Lebanon. Above all, the circuitous nature of Hanna Yaaqoub's traumatic experience is embodied in the "chronotope" of "the Castle of Belgrade" that informs the title of the novel. Bakhtin used this term to denote the merging of the spatial and the temporal into a single entity emphasizing their intrinsic interconnectedness. The contention

of the present study is that the Castle of Belgrade, whose history is a standing testimony to the everlasting rotation of power among different nations of the earth, serves as an echo of the endless recurrence of trauma and the circuitous nature of traumatic memory.

Beirut, with its multiple archaeological layers, and Mount Lebanon with its warring/neighbouring communities, may achieve prime of place in the overlapping settings, events, and characters of *YE* and *DB*, but the interconnectedness of Lebanon and its people to the whole world is emphasized in all Jaber's work by means of the textual representation of the traumatic experiences of individuals and communities that transcend religious and national divides. Both *YE* and *DB* show individuals and communities, in Lebanon and worldwide, to be pawns in the hands of power relations that victimize all humanity regardless of race or religion, while attempting to entrench their hold on the world through an almost dehumanized conceptual power. The fact that the chain of traumas that follow one another in quick succession and form the bulk of the plots of both novels are not only political/economic – in other words man-made – in origin, but are often natural disasters that cause widespread devastation at individual and communal levels, emphasizes the absurd futility and inherent danger of cultivating notions of revenge. In the light of this epiphany, self-aggrandizing, grievances-nurturing, or even mutually-incriminating narratives such as those prevalent among various sects of Lebanon's historiographers, are shown to be not only a threat to stability and peaceful coexistence, but also an ignorant/arrogant reproduction of the trauma and victimization that have caused them to be written in the first place.

While fully exploiting the technical narrative potential of testimonies of trauma given by surviving victims and eyewitnesses in the two novels discussed – with varying degrees in both novels in relation to categorical and quantitative differences in the nature of the traumatic events, so that *YE* retains a semblance of the coherent linear narration of a bildungsroman whereas *DB* evinces utter chronological collapse, narrative uncertainty and fragmentation in the true fashion of post-traumatic testimonies – the compliance of the novels with Caruth's view of the relationship between trauma and history is of great significance. *YE* and *DB* (and Caruth) foreground

the inevitable distortion of historical memory, given that historical events are always filtered through the memories of traumatic repression. It is this vision that allows Jaber's novels to engage with the rewriting of the history of Lebanon – attempting in the meanwhile to rescue the archaeological layers of Beirut from the prosthetic history grafted upon its surface by the post-1990s "spectacle city" – without endorsing sectarian political agendas. Jaber's fiction also manages to incorporate moments of epiphany, similar to those described by John Russon in *Bearing Witness to Epiphany*, where he points out that "the compelling reality" of our existence is our attunement to nature:

we respond to the rhythmic cycle of the elements – the transmutation between earth, air, fire, and water ... are attuned to the rhythm of the day, ... resonate with the cycle of the seasons, ... These senses are original epiphanies, neither created by our conceptualizing nor open to our refutation. ... Behind them, there is the inexplicable nurturance of the sun that is the clarity of vision and of the earth that is the foundation of stability and consistency. ... These are two original senses, irreducible forms that appear compellingly and guidingly for us. (23)<sup>63</sup>

The present study concludes by citing two moments of epiphany that manage to shine in the midst of the darkness of Jaber's "past-present" fictional spaces. Towards the end of *YE*, Yusef has a dream-within-a dream where he sees himself as a young man working in the fields of his mountain village Kafr Borak on a hot summer day. Having spent the whole day irrigating the tomato field, he lies down to rest in the shadow of an oak tree:

His whole body aches; there are tearing pains in his joints as the afternoon breeze comes and goes drying his sweating skin; in a fleeting, and unique, moment of ecstasy he has the greatest sensation in the world: a very simple sensation of satisfaction and satiation (he has watered the fields and finished the day's work); simultaneously, it is an all-inclusive feeling that contains within itself the mystery of life, all the secrets of our galaxy: he looks at the tomato bushes rising above the earth, and listens to the trickling water filling up the labyrinths of his ears, and seems to see the translucent



glittering water droplets rising up the root-system of the plants and filling them with light ... the water-satiated earth breathes ... a nightingale's song rises to the skies ... He remembers – as he becomes once more the old man on the porch in a distant land – this living rhythm rising and penetrating the universe from one end to another, connecting all to all, and echoing in his own pulse. (290)<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, a moment of epiphany of realized communication and brotherhood in *DB* occurs at the end of nearly two-thirds of the novel, when the number of the exiled Druze prisoners has been decimated to a mere twenty-seven (including Hanna) out of the original five hundred fifty deported years ago from Beirut – a statistical proof of the dire conditions of their exile. The remaining “brothers” are enjoying one of their above-ground periods of existence in the Bulgarian countryside, and for the first time the Druze brothers show signs of accepting Hanna fully as one of them. The camaraderie extends to the Bulgarian villagers who have been fellow sufferers although nominally “free” citizens rather than imprisoned exiles. Victimhood seems to be the universal status, making human ties all the more precious. The time is spring,

They harvested the wheat, ploughed the earth and planted cabbage and cauliflower. During the Cholera epidemic, they have become very close to their peasant neighbours, helping them with the difficult task of digging graves in the snow, and sometimes even burying their dead in a common grave. ... Sheikh Mahmoud showed Hanna how to hold the little bushels tenderly between his fingers, make a hole in the ground, plant the bushel then support it gently with earth, and water it. ... They ground the wheat, baked bread, and cut the first loaf into five equal portions, one for each: “By the will of God, next summer we will be home, harvesting and baking in the Mountain,” said one brother; “And you will come visit us Hanna, so we can all share a meal together,” said another. (172)<sup>65</sup>

**Author's note:** All the above-mentioned quotations from Jaber's *Yusef the Englishman* and *The Druze of Belgrade*, as well as Jaber's interviews, are translated from Arabic to English by the author of this paper.

### Notes

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- 1 Rabee Jaber, "Q & A with Rabee Jaber", 19 December 2011.
- 2 Rabee Jaber, *Yusef the Englishman*, 1999.
- 3 Rabee Jaber, *The Druze of Belgrade: The Story of Hanna Yaaqoub*, 2011.
- 4 Rabee Jaber, "Q & A".
- 5 "The Druze", en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Druze
- 6 <http://arablit.wordpress.com/2009/12/18/who-are-the-arabic-booker-nominees-rabee-jaber>
- 7 "Rabee Jaber", *Banipal*, 2014.
- 8 Kamal Salibi, "Rabee Jaber and Yusuf al-Inglizi".
- 9 "Rabee Jaber", *Banipal*, 2014.
- 10 Max Weiss, "Wonders of Destruction in Arabic Fiction".
- 11 David Joseph Wrisley, "Metafiction Meets Migration: Art from the Archives in Rabee Jaber's *Amerika*".
- 12 Interview, *BBC extra*, BBC World Service, 28 March 2012.
- 13 Interview, "Rabee Jaber: International Prize for Arabic Fiction: 2012 Shortlist on Vimeo", (Spring 2011).
- 14 "Nominees of Arabic Booker Talking about their Novel Writing Experiences (6)", *Al-Ittihad*, 25 February 2010.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Jaber, *The Mehli Report*, 2006; Trans. Kareem James Abu-Zeid, 2013.
- 17 Weiss, "Wonders of Destruction".
- 18 Jaber, *Ralph Rizqallah in the Looking Glass*, 1997.
- 19 Zeina G.Halabi, *Writing Melancholy*.
- 20 Kamal Salibi, *Beirut wa al-Zaman: Qira'a fi Thulatheyyat Rabee Jaber 'Beirut Madinat al-Alam', (Beirut and Time: A Reading of Rabee Jaber's Trilogy 'Beirut: City of the World')*.
- 21 Robyn Creswell, "Chasing Beirut's Ghosts".
- 22 Yusri Hazran, "Between Authenticity and Alienation: The Druzes and Lebanon's History".
- 23 Yusri Hazran, *The Druze Community and the Lebanese State: Between Confrontation and Reconciliation*.
- 24 Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*.
- 25 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.
- 26 Craig Larkin, "Reconstructing and Deconstructing Beirut: Space, Memory and Lebanese Youth."
- 27 [www.solidere.com.lb](http://www.solidere.com.lb)
- 28 Ward Vloeberghs, "The Genesis of a Mosque: Negotiating Sacred Space in Downtown Beirut".

- 29 Elias Khoury, "The Memory of the City".
- 30 Nabil Beyhoum, "The Crisis of Urban Culture: The Three Reconstruction Plans for Beirut".
- 31 Michael Sorkin, "See You in Disneyland".
- 32 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.
- 33 Saree Makdisi, "Beirut, a City without History?"
- 34 Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*.
- 35 Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*.
- 36 Jaber, *Yusef the Englishman*.
- 37 Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de Memoire*, (Gallimard), abridged translation, *Realms of Memory*, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer.
- 38 Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*.
- 39 Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*.
- 40 BBC Extra Interview, March 2012.
- 41 Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*.
- 42 Jaber, *Yusef the Englishman*.
- 43 Jaber, *Druze of Belgrade*.
- 44 Jaber, *Yusef the Englishman*.
- 45 Jaber, *Druze of Belgrade*.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 Philip K. Hitti, *Origins of the Druze People and Religion: with Extracts from Their Sacred Writings*.
- 48 Faisal Darraj, "The Voice of Writing and the Dawn of History".
- 49 Jaber, *Yusef the Englishman*.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 Paul E. Walker, *The Caliph of Cairo: Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah (996 – 1021)*.
- 53 Jaber, *Yusef the Englishman*.
- 54 Anne Whitehead, "Trauma and Memory Studies".
- 55 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*.
- 56 Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*.
- 57 Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*.
- 58 Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*.
- 59 *Ibid.*

60 Interview, "Rabee Jaber: International Prize of Arabic Fiction", Spring 2011.

61 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist.

62 *Ibid.*

63 John Russon, *Bearing Witness to Epiphany: Persons, Things, and the Nature of Erotic Life*.

64 Jaber, *Yusef the Englishman*.

65 Jaber, *Druze of Belgrade*.

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