

# Belatedness and Testimony: A Trauma Studies Perspective of Omar Mohamed's *When Stars Are Scattered*

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## Abstract

*This paper analyses the portrayal of trauma and displacement in *When Stars Are Scattered*, a graphic memoir by Omar Mohamed, in the light of Caruth, Felman and Laub's trauma theory. The narrative shows the fragmented nature of traumatic memory, which could be aligned with Caruth's claim that trauma cannot be fully absorbed into consciousness immediately after the event. The concept of belatedness and testimony put forth by Caruth and Laub is applied to the text, bringing out the instances where the protagonist relives the traumatic experience through nightmares. By analyzing the visual elements of the novel, the study highlights the outstanding quality of graphic narratives in portraying the complex emotional states of the characters.*

**Keywords:** Refugee Narratives, Belatedness, Testimony, Nightmares, Graphic Narratives.

## Introduction

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory is useful in grasping how trauma exists in fractured, interminable, and frequently unexplainable forms. Her perspective states that trauma is never perceived to its full extent as it takes place, rather it returns to the individual in the form of haunting flashbacks, nightmares, and repetitions. This theory is especially pertinent to *When Stars Are Scattered* because for Omar, the experiences of displacement and loss are not gone forever. Instead, they through memories, dreams, and silences, and profoundly affect his psychological journey.

*When Stars Are Scattered* is a graphic novel written by Omar Mohamed and illustrated by Victoria Jamieson. The illustrated part recounts the true tale of a Dadaab refugee camp and Omar's life in it as a Somali refugee. The novel contains deep themes such as displacement, loss, and the hope one carries in the midst of it all, offering an edifying glimpse into the refugee catastrophe around the globe. The graphic novel paints 'trauma' in a distinctive light by making the readers feel what they go through after losing the feeling

of belonging and suffering in silence. This text utilizes trauma theory to delve deeper into how the exact scenes from a chapter of this book show the deep impact it leaves on readers and how it portrays a sense of trauma. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth's seminal work claims how trauma is an experience that alters one's state and causes disruption in memory. It reappears in fragments that are indirect, hence claiming to be unassimilated.

The focus on the forgotten aspects of 'testimony' provides an ethical approach towards the survivors. Caruth's theory depicts a method of how we can visually and narratively analyze trauma and how works of art turn to monologues carrying a sense of healing. Through broken panels, recurring motifs, and silence, *When Stars Are Scattered* shows the unsayable about Omar's trauma. But the book balances this with resilience and hope and shows the power of education, community and storytelling to rebuild a fractured self. This study places the novel in the context of trauma literature and refugee narratives and argues its uniqueness as a graphic novel. By combining trauma theory with a close reading of the book's visual and textual elements, this paper will show how the refugee experience is made accessible to the reader.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Trauma theory by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub is the framework in analyzing the novel especially in its exploration of fragmented memory, repetition and the unsayable nature of traumatic experience. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) Caruth defines trauma as an event that overloads the mind's ability to process it at the time of the event. Instead, trauma emerges later, often through fragmented and recurring memories, dreams, or behavior. She asserts this by stating "so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 4).

For Caruth, trauma is not just about the event itself but about the delayed and disruptive impact which haunts the survivor and resists being assimilated into a coherent narrative. Shoshana Felman's *Testimony* is also applied in text for its emphasis on witnessing a traumatic event. According to her "the process of testimony" is "bearing witness to a crisis or trauma" (Felman 3). Trauma survivors often struggle to articulate their experience because the trauma is not fully available to them; it exists as an unassimilated and fragmented memory. Testimony is the act of bearing witness to the unsayable, where the survivor tries to narrate their fragmented experience, often through repetition and indirect reference. Felman argues that this act of testimony is also an ethical encounter between the survivor and the witness. The witness's role is to listen, validate, and engage with the survivor's narrative to create a space of understanding and acknowledgement of the trauma.

*When Stars Are Scattered* adheres to principles of trauma theory in both its narrative and visual form. The graphic novel's fragmented page layouts, repetitive imagery and silent moments show the discontinuities of Omar's traumatic memories. For example, Omar's recurring dreams about his mother show the unprocessed grief and longing that is his psychological state. These dreams are not direct memories but fragmented and symbolic manifestations of his unresolved trauma as Caruth would say trauma returns in haunting and indirect ways. In addition, the visual storytelling amplifies the unsayable aspects of trauma. The use of negative space, abrupt transitions between panels and the faces of the characters convey the emotional and psychological weight of displacement and loss in a way that words can't. From Caruth's perspective, creating and sharing *When Stars Are Scattered* is itself an act of testimony. By telling his story, Omar Mohamed is trying to process his trauma and invite readers to bear witness to the refugee experience. This ethical relationship between narrator and reader is what she calls the relational dynamics of trauma, testimony and witnessing and how storytelling can be a way to navigate and understand trauma.

## Trauma, Nightmares and Narrative Structure

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory is a suitable framework to understand the narrative structure of *When Stars Are Scattered*. According to Caruth, trauma is inaccessible to direct consciousness and tends to resurface in fragmented, repetitive and often haunting ways. This disruption of linear narrative is exactly what the graphic novel does with its visual and textual elements to reflect the fragmented and unspeakable nature of trauma experienced by its protagonist, Omar Mohamed. One of the most striking ways the novel shows trauma is through its use of broken panels and disjointed storytelling. The layout often mirrors Omar's mental state, especially when he's feeling emotional. For example, when he's thinking about his mother, the panels are broken, with abrupt jumps between memories, dreams and present day. This is in line with Caruth's idea that trauma defies narrative coherence, instead emerges as incomplete and disjointed memories.

The broken panels capture the fragmented nature of Omar's traumatic memory, and the reader feels his disorientation and unresolved grief. Caruth's theory also talks about the repetition of trauma, how survivors relive their experiences in dreams, flashbacks or recurring behaviors. In the novel, Omar's recurring dreams of his mother are a great example. Sigmund Freud, in his *Beyond the Pleasure principle* (1920), talks about his experiences with veterans of World War I, who had frequent dreams of the horrifying scenes of the battlefield that they encountered. Freud was astonished to see the frightful awakening of the veterans through nightmares, which contradicted the tenets of psychoanalytic theory, where he believed dreams to be the fulfillment of desire. He talks about fright or unpreparedness, which makes the dreamer not only see the scenes of traumatic experiences but also to wake in shock. In *When Stars Are Scattered* by Victoria and Omar, Omar's recurring nightmares make him relive his most painful moments over and over, especially his separation from his mum and the uncertainty of what's to come. As Freud says "in traumatic neuroses dreams bring the patient back to the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright" (Freud 13). Omar's dreams keep him stuck in loops of fear and longing, just like Freud says trauma resurfaces in sleep and we can't fully escape our past and the lasting effects of it. Caruth in *Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival* (2001), studies Freud's analysis for the causes of nightmares. Freud believed the traumatic encounter is not perceived to be a threat of life, instead causing a breach in mind because of its unpreparedness and this lack of direct experience, resulting in repetition of nightmares he concludes (Caruth, *Parting Words* 22). Caruth emphasizes that since the event was not fully grasped at first place, it returns back through nightmares as an attempt to overcome the fact that it is not direct (*Parting Words* 22).

When viewed through the lens of Lynnette Astrid Dalrymple in her paper titled, *To Sleep Perchance to Dream: Trauma Response and the Function of Nightmares and Rumination in Trauma Survivors* (2009) nightmares have a significant role customizing the cognitive and affective response of trauma survivors. This is relevant to *When Stars Are Scattered* where Omar's mother is supposed to play a nurturing part and at the same time becomes a constant nightmare. Hartmann's idea of dreams being cross-connected is what helps Omar remember (Dalrymple 6). He never thinks of the details of shameful separation, only the wishful 'not so fond' aspects of his life. Memories serve as an anchor to Omar's trauma. It allows him to place the pain of separation in a much broader context and eventually overcome their memories. These nightmares might be considered disturbing or overly emotionally charged but according to Dalrymple, they said the survivor in finding their way back to reality (6). In the case of Omar, his dreams allow him to relive his traumatic past yet strive toward a brighter future. Through these dreams, he learns to cope with his reality which is necessary for him in order to begin the healing process.

These dreams aren't linear memories but symbolic representations of his longing and unresolved loss. The repetition of these dreams throughout the narrative makes them haunting, they resurface

when Omar is vulnerable or uncertain. Caruth's idea of trauma as a belated experience – one that resurfaces long after the event – is also reflected in these dreams, which disrupt Omar's attempts to focus on his present reality.

### **Colours and Silence**

In *When Stars Are Scattered*, color is deftly employed as per Praveen Toppo's *Chromatic narratives: The semiotic and psychological use of colour in art and graphic novels* (2004). In fine artworks, color is used for intensive psychological engagement, but the novel uses color to amplify fine art and evoke emotions (Toppo and Ahamed 2). The toning having more vivid hues while despondent and muted scenes Omar undergoes hope echoes his emotional state during his recollection of the event. All these, similar to how they used fine art and comics, foster trauma, reports emotions, and even provide narration shifts Omar recollects. Usage of colours and expressions to depict flashbacks and grief color shifts along with the scenes (Jamieson and Omar 183). At times muted and dreary, while other times more toned down: this outlines and underscores the extent of trauma he still experiences while providing a visual distinction between memory and present reality. The unspeakable nature of trauma is a key theme in Cathy Caruth's theory, especially her idea that trauma often exists beyond language, manifesting through silence, fragmented memories and indirect expressions.

In *When Stars Are Scattered*, silence is a big part of Omar's psychological and emotional struggles, showing the limits of language to express the depth of his experiences. Throughout the novel, silence is used to depict moments of deep loss and longing, especially when Omar thinks about his mother. These moments are visually represented through empty panels, muted colours and no dialogue. For example, when Omar revisits memories of his mother, the narrative relies heavily on visual elements – his pained expressions, the vast emptiness of the camp, and stark contrasts in shading – to convey his unresolved grief.

Amir talks about Caruth's idea of the "traumatic paradox" which is that trauma is both the event itself and the struggle to fit it into your own story (Amir 3). Caruth says that survivors are most engaged with the event precisely because they cannot fully understand it and so there's a disconnect between their memories of the trauma and the present. The silences in the novel fit with Caruth's idea of trauma as an experience that resists direct expression, requiring other forms of representation. Trauma often manifests in the inability to speak the pain fully and this unspeakability is reflected in the novel's use of visual silence. Empty spaces in the panels, muted colors and no text in key moments emphasizes Omar's unspoken emotions.

For example, during scenes of separation from his mother or moments of despair, the focus is on Omar's face, surrounded by white space, and conveys the depth of his trauma without words. These silent panels align with Caruth's idea that trauma is beyond language, and requires other modes of expression to convey its impact. Furthermore, the novel as a whole can be seen as an act of testimony, a concept central to Caruth's theory. By telling his story, Omar Mohamed is bearing witness to his own trauma, and transforming his fragmented memories into a coherent narrative for the reader. This act of testimony also asks the reader to be a witness, as Caruth puts it. The graphic novel format makes the reader an active participant in interpreting the interplay between the visuals and text, and engaging with Omar's trauma on multiple levels. In short, the narrative structure of the novel reflects Caruth's trauma theory through its broken panels, repetition of traumatic motifs and use of silence to convey the unspeakable. By weaving these elements together with an act of testimony, the novel not only shows the psychological impact of trauma but also an ethical engagement with the refugee experience.

The graphic novel medium, with its ability to juxtapose text and image, is a powerful tool to represent the unspeakable parts of Omar's trauma. Silence also underscores the haunting and repetitive nature of trauma, a key concept in Caruth's theory. Omar's recurring dreams about his mother are depicted with minimal dialogue and fragmented visual sequences, showing the inaccessibility of these memories and the cyclical nature of his longing. These dreams are not linear narratives but fractured and symbolic episodes that haunt Omar's consciousness, illustrating Caruth's idea of trauma as a "belated experience" that disrupts present reality. The lack of words in these sequences forces the reader to engage deeply with the visual storytelling, to be immersed in Omar's psychological state. Moreover, the silences in the novel reflect the broader marginalisation and voicelessness of refugees. The lives of those in Dadaab are marked by uncertainty and an unspoken sense of loss, personal and collective. The novel's use of visual storytelling breaks this silence, giving voice to experiences often erased from global narratives. This is in line with Caruth's idea of testimony, where narrating trauma becomes an act of bearing witness, for the survivor and the audience. By sharing his story, Omar turns silence into testimony, inviting the reader to engage ethically with the refugee experience while preserving the unspeakable parts of his trauma.

### **Narrative as a Testimonial Space**

Equally important within trauma theory is the testimony, put forward by Dori Laub whereby trauma survivors strive to make sense of their disintegrated experiences and in the process, the audience is considered an ethical witness to their suffering (Felman and Laub 58). Amir quotes Laub, who says that we can only understand our traumatic stories when we tell them, "A person can only know his or her story when he or she tells it to him or herself" (Amir 3). This is why narrative is so important in processing trauma. In *When Stars Are Scattered*, the act of testimony shows prominence in both the narrative design as well as its larger design, since the novel performs the dual role of describing the life story of Omar Mohammed and imaging his readers to witness the trauma that accompanies the existence of refugees.

Laub contends that testimony is never the mere recitation of what happened, but is speaking one's way through the unutterable. Trauma cannot ever be rendered as complete because it is by nature insurmountable and survivors learn to use metaphors, metonymy, ellipsis, or even repetitions to relay their experiences. In the text, Omar's testimony is revealed to be buried in his memories, in his dreams and his last decision to tell the world. For example, the anguish Omar feels when craving for his mother often gets elaborated in dreams and moments of silence are a poignant indirect testimony. Such wishes help him to explain his grief and loss with the hope that his testimony reveals the true power of displacement. On the other side of the coin, a graphic novel complements this recount through fostering a multisensory approach. The visual and textual formatting of *When Stars Are Scattered* draws the readers into Omar's world and makes them interpret his trauma firsthand. Readers are transported into the psychological and emotional realities of life in Dadaab refugee camp through empty spaces, visual fragmentation, and the interweaving of hope and despair. This relation between text and imagery goes hand in glove with Laub's idea stating trauma needs a witness who engages within the survivor's account so as to capture the intricacies and gaps surrounding the testimony. For the audience, the story requires them to be ethical witnesses, for whom the primary responsibility is engaging and authenticating Omar's tale. Listening, in this case reading, to the survivor's testimony requires the reader to imagine the whole world, including the intended one. To give testimony is to step into the shoes of the once passive victim to step into action, enabling the global audience to witness the refugee crisis. The book's deeper meaning is how it portrays the plight of refugees. The focus shifts from cold statistics towards more personal accounts of struggle and the will to live.

Readers listen to Omar's testimony and look deeper into the ethical aspects of his narrative. This invites them to take a moment and think about how they contribute, or fail to, to the fight against the institutional problems, which exist for this group of people. This witnessing act enables readers to step into Omar's shoes and helps them understand the trauma in its entirety. The inquiry into human captivity transforms when one comes across Omar's case. The use of testimonial evidence and the invitation to the reader to become a witness in itself illustrates the proper use of constructive imaginations.

### **Resilience and Hope in the Face of Trauma**

While *When Stars Are Scattered* seeks to have an in-depth examination of displacement and loss, it also has the very important narrative of resilience and hope. Showing how people in the most extreme situations manage to get the healing they need, adapt, and even imagine a better future is the central theme of this novel. This exploration of resilience is similar to Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as one that causes disruption while being an area with potential transformation. In the novel, Omar Mohamed is a principal figure who goes through immense trauma, but also possesses the will to forge a decent life for himself and his brother Hassan. The paper also studies the resilience and hope of Omar through his pursuit of education. This is the major source of his self-assertion, even though his life in the Dadaab refugee camp is quite miserable. Education becomes a source of hope, something to live for beyond the camp, preparations for life, and the ghastly repetitive situation he is in. This suffices to demonstrate a good deal of a person's ability to master their trauma and how they employ such strategies to overcome pain.

The novel also shows the deep rootedness of the concept of community as an aid in resilience. The relationships of Omar with his friends, neighbors, and even mentors like Salaan, within the camp serve him emotionally as joy with his classmates, amid the hardships. Such relations act as a counterweight against trauma isolation, demonstrating how communities banding together provide aid in helping people reconstruct their lives. In this regard, Fatuma, the foster mother of Omar and Hassan, demonstrates the essence of love and constancy in the normal world by making them feel like they belong. Visual narration helps paint the picture of strength and the process of mending. The most important panels, I argue, are the ones that attempt to show the 'light' of the deep darkness. They put together desperately needed scenes of laughter, play, and shared meals with barren life within the shadows of camp. The colors in scenes of celebration or achievement clearly represent the aftermath of a scenario filled with trauma which is why the joy, hope, and positivity is brought out in full force. By depicting the act of storytelling as an external form of healing, trauma is alleviated simultaneously. The moment he tells his tale, testimony floods out. In fact, Omar does not only enable readers to identify with the enduring spirit of refugees, but he assists refugees in dealing with trauma on their own. Therefore, the novel demonstrates the strength of human spirit and togetherness to rise above struggle and provide an astounding novel filled with hope.

### **Conclusion**

By applying trauma theory, this paper has traced the trauma's multifaceted expression in the novel as well as the ways in which horrific silence shapes and articulates suffering and the moral obligation of the audience to see and recognize the pain of others. The combined form of text and visual representation of trauma makes the graphic novel medium an exceptionally potent one. The juxtaposed panels, dreams, and stretches of silence enable to deeply reflect the emotional disintegration and psychological dislocation that Omar Mohamed endured as a child refugee. When Caruth remarked that trauma cannot simply be assimilated and verbalized, but rather

returns in haunting and abstract ways, it becomes essential to note that such forms rarely blend with overarching narrative forms. *When Stars Are Scattered* does not adhere to regularly defined boundaries, rather it employs such visual techniques to augment storytelling by presenting such multi-layered complex trauma that defies emotional boundaries. This does not mean that the focus of the novel is completely on trauma. The readers will discover that the later stages of the plot attempt to focus on recovery.

The active hope and the positive enclosure around Omar strongly contrast with the hopeless sense of displacement brought upon the shattered vision of the world, along with his determination to achieve education. *When Stars Are Scattered* exemplifies the collective testimony of both Omar Mohamed's and countless other refugee experiences. It strongly captures the notion of the innate 'power of human connection' alongside the enduring spirit of perseverance and skillfully amalgamates it with the vision of a better future with an expansive narrative alongside struggling trauma. The graphic novel does a striking job addressing the contemporary concerns of human rights alongside the displacement, hope, trauma and resilience together. It is a well composed piece that reinforces the necessity of listening to the silenced and marginalized.

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