



RESEARCH PAPER**Orchestrating a Palestinian Holocaust: Navigating Trauma and Healing through Subversive Storytelling in *Gaza Writes Back***

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the psychoanalytic dimensions of *Gaza Writes Back* through Dominick LaCapra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through," focusing on themes of trauma, memory, and resistance. "Acting out" refers to the compulsive repetition of traumatic experiences, trapping individuals in cycles of psychological suffering. In contrast, "working through" involves confronting and processing these experiences, allowing for mourning and potential healing. Applying these concepts to *Gaza Writes Back*, the paper examines the role of personal and collective trauma in shaping the psychological landscape of Gazans, with literature serving as a powerful tool for resistance and recovery. While "acting out" illustrates the re-living of past horrors, storytelling as a form of "working through" enables introspection and the navigation of grief. This paper highlights the capacity of literature to amplify marginalized Gazan voices, foster resilience, and offer a path toward healing in the face of the enduring impacts of war.

KEYWORDS Acting-out, Gaza, Resilience, Storytelling, Trauma, Working-through

Introduction

Reefat Alareer, a prominent Palestinian writer, editor, and academic, encapsulated his profound mission with the poignant declaration, "If I die, you must live to tell my story" (Antoon, 2023, p, 1). Through his seminal works *Gaza Writes Back* and *Gaza Unsilenced*, Alareer illuminated the harrowing realities of life under siege in Gaza and gave voice to the silenced narratives of young Palestinians. His writings, marked by unflinching honesty, exposed the brutalities faced by his people, making him a powerful beacon for Palestinian voices. Tragically, Alareer was assassinated on December 6, 2023, leaving a profound void for the Palestinian nation. His legacy, however, endures in his compelling storytelling and his unwavering commitment to revealing the truth of his people's plight. As one of his close friends poignantly observed, "What Reefat asked of every one of us was to tell his tale and those of others who need to change this world, need to stop the genocide. It is not fiction. It is his life" (Toha, 2024, p, 3).

Gaza Writes Back offers a compelling collection of narratives that capture themes of resilience, loss, shattered dreams, memory, resistance, and identity through five stories. These accounts delve into the harsh realities of survival under occupation, the horrors of war, and the unwavering spirit of defiance. As Baroud eloquently states, "These stories provide a tangible platform for silenced voices to be heard and means towards gaining

some dignity for a wounded nation” (Alareer, 2014, p, 4). Hanan Habashi’s “L for Life” depicts the profound emotional and psychological toll of growing up amidst violence, shaping children's perceptions of life and death. Haya Rabah’s “Scars” reveals the deep emotional and physical scars left by the loss of her entire family in a bombardment, while Sulaiman’s “One War Day” illustrates the psychological trauma inflicted on his fellow countrymen. “The Story of the Land” mourns the loss and grief of Palestinians as they witness their lands and olive trees being destroyed by bulldozers. Lastly, Yaghi’s “Spared” explores the lingering impact of traumatic childhood memories. Together, these stories address the impacts of war, the weight of traumatic memories, and the enduring quest for freedom and hope amid despair.

LaCapra’s Working-through and Acting-out as a theoretical tool:

Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History Writing Trauma* elucidates two pivotal forms of grappling with traumatic events: “acting out” and “working through” (Rubenstein, 2024, p, 159). Acting out, characterized by unconscious emotional conflicts and self-destructive behaviors, is distinguished from working through, a therapeutic process aimed at alleviating mental anguish. As LaCapra asserts, “Acting out is not a form of resolution; instead, it is an obsessive behavior by an individual” (David, 2013, p, 2). The failure to transition from acting out to working through can inflict ongoing harm, as it perpetuates the repetitive reliving of past traumas without closure. This relentless cycle causes past experiences to intrude upon and disrupt present life. In contrast, working through involves striving to achieve a “certain distance” from these historical traumas, allowing for a clearer distinction between past, present, and future (LaCapra, 1998, p, 2). Over time, this process facilitates healing and acceptance, enabling individuals to overcome denial and advance, as they come to terms with their past and move forward.

Gaining distance from historical trauma is pivotal for healing, as exemplified by Hanan’s transformative journey in “L for Life.” Her eleven years of mourning ultimately pave the way towards acceptance, illustrating her path to self-actualization. As Schick elucidates, “The process of working through grief entails three broad tasks: expressing grief, reconstructing events and history in narrative form, and critical judgment” (Schick, 2011, p, 1848). Similarly, in “Scar,” the narrator's act of buying lavenders in memory of her children signifies her acceptance of loss, an act only possible when one has reconciled with the reality of their grief. Hanan's fading scar symbolizes her emotional and physical healing. LaCapra notes that “acting out occurs where sufferers become ‘stuck’ in the past and live a restricted life” (Schick, 2011, p, 6), a condition that mirrors the collective trauma of Gaza’s community, who find their lives constrained by their historical burdens. In contrast, LaCapra asserts that “working through is a much more difficult response to trauma; it does not paint the world in stark black and white or good and evil, as acting out tends to do, and it requires work” (Schick, 2011, p, 6). The process of working through demands significant effort and complexity, distinguishing it from the more rigid and simplistic responses of acting out.

Literature Review

Narrative Endowments: The essential role of storytelling in Palestine:

The relentless war imposed on Gaza by Israel has wrought profound psychological trauma and devastation. In the article “Gaza Writes Back: Narrating Palestine,” (2014) Alareer underscores the transformative power of storytelling in Palestine, depicting it as a crucial act of resistance that encapsulates the sufferings, and traumatic memories of his people. He reflects on the devastating impact of Israel’s Operation Cast Lead, asserting that

“it was clear as crystal to Gazans then that Israel was deliberately and systematically targeting life and hope...we are silenced forever” (Alareer, 2014, p, 3). Through their narratives, Palestinian writers like Alareer, Sulaiman, Yaghi, Ali, and Rabah resist injustice and challenge Israel’s misleading portrayals of peace efforts, security concerns, and existential threats. The war has ravaged Gaza’s essential infrastructure, including homes, schools, hospitals, and universities, thereby disrupting daily life, education, and healthcare. Alareer vividly describes the dire conditions faced by Palestinian refugees, revealing that writing serves as a vital testimony. In his view, the purpose of life is to share the stories of suffering, hope, and survival with the world.

In Palestine, the venerable tradition of storytelling—transmitted from elders to children—serves as a profound repository of collective memory, personal experience, and the historical narrative of Gaza. This tradition has evolved into a powerful act of resistance against invaders and colonizers. Alareer articulates this sentiment eloquently, stating that “writing back is also an act of life, of hope, and of resistance; it fulfills an obligation to humanity... Israeli campaigns of misinformation, or *hasbara*” (Alareer, 2014, p, 10). Storytelling is thus perceived as a vital means of enduring and transcending life’s trials. In *Gaza Writes Back*, Alareer presents a mosaic of stories that depict the lives of families displaced from their homes and properties, encapsulating the harrowing realities of exile. The collection’s narratives portray life amidst the specters of death and the flickers of hope in the face of adversity. These stories delve into the personal experiences of victims’ families and explore class divisions within Gaza, unraveling the persistent suffering of Palestinians who confront daily injustice, violence, and oppression. *Gaza Writes Back* aspires to illuminate the global audience about the severe tribulations endured by Palestinians under the weight of Israeli brutality, shining a light on the true plight of refugees and the resolute youth striving for their land amidst the ravages of military aggression.

The ongoing military operations, missile attacks, and bombings have profoundly disrupted the lives of Palestinians. In the article “Oppressed and Challenged but not Defeated: Families in Gaza Writes Back,” (2021) Hussein examines the narratives of Gaza’s families to reveal Palestine’s overarching story of loss, suffering, collective trauma, displacement, and resilience. He critically assesses the impacts of Israeli attacks and the broader practices affecting Gaza. Prominent literary figures such as Edward Said, Saoud Army, and Najla Said have all contributed to elucidating the traumatic experiences faced by Palestinians. Edward Said notably emphasizes the importance of narration, stating, “He has specifically focused on narration as an important form of cultural production which Palestinians, like all colonized people, need to employ to assert their identity and resist erasure” (Hussein, 2021, p, 4). This perspective underscores the role of narrative in resisting cultural erasure and asserting identity. Hussein further explores the dire conditions endured by Palestinians, who live under the persistent threat of humiliation and deprivation. He provides an in-depth analysis of the historical context of Palestine and the dominant discourses perpetuated by Israel, which have both amplified and sustained the Palestinian voice amidst ongoing adversity.

Despite Israel’s persistent efforts to dismantle Gaza and sever its ties to Palestine, these attempts have failed to extinguish the region’s spirit of resistance. Israel’s systematic strategies aim to obliterate the Palestinian will to resist, as Hussein highlights: “The targeting of the Palestinian home, house, and family has been and continues to be used as Israel’s systematic policy for controlling Palestinians” (Hussein, 2021, p, 6). These tactics underscore the brutal forms of violence inflicted upon Palestinians. *Gaza Writes Back* vividly depicts the lives of those who have endured the traumatic impacts of various Israeli military operations, portraying the harsh realities faced by Palestinians. The collection

itself stands as a testament to Palestinian defiance and resilience amidst Israel's relentless efforts to erase Palestine from the global consciousness. Israel's expropriation of Palestinian land – once a symbol of livelihood, honor, and prestige – further underscores the brutality of its policies. Hussein also details the harrowing experiences of Gaza families confronting this violence. In Alfaraa's story "Please Shoot to Kill," the reader is exposed to the tragic and painful experience of Abu Laila, who endures humiliation and death at the hands of Israeli soldiers. Additionally, Hussein explores the struggles of women in Gaza who dedicate themselves to sheltering and protecting their families amid ongoing conflict, highlighting their critical role in the resistance against Israeli violence.

In Refaat Alareer's *Book Reviews*, (2019) Sayigh explores the profound impact of Israel's assault on the narratives within *Gaza Writes Back*, illustrating the suffering and resistance of Palestinians in the face of Israel's brutality and violence. Sayigh elaborates on the origins of these short stories, which are crafted as a response to the oppressive attacks on Gaza. He notes, "Israel's attack on Gaza named Operation 'Cast Lead' 'caused more than 1,400 deaths, more than 5,000 injuries, and the destruction or severe damage of more than 11,000 homes'" (Sayigh, 2019, p, 1). Through this literary technique, Alareer captures the essence of Israel's violence, aiming to counteract efforts to silence the burgeoning voices of Palestine.

Gaza Writes Back poignantly captures the enduring pain, constant threat of violence, and systemic oppression endured by Palestinians. In the evocative narrative "One War Day," the plight of Hamza is depicted, whose attempt to read is interrupted by the omnipresent danger of Israeli bombs and explosions, ultimately finding him on the brink of death. Yaghi's "Spared" unveils the harrowing brutality inflicted by Israeli soldiers, who ruthlessly attack and kill children playing in the streets. Noor Al-Sousi's "Will I Ever Get Out?" exposes the pervasive issues of unemployment and the relentless struggles of individuals striving to protect their families amidst adversity. In "Story of the Land", Sara Ali eloquently portrays the deep-rooted love Palestinians have for their land, agriculture, and trees, reflecting their profound connection to their homeland. Furthermore, Abu Laila's narrative "Neverland" sheds light on the Israeli government's control over Palestine, particularly its denial of essential medical facilities to the beleaguered population.

Palestinian Young Writer's Perspectives on Gaza Writes Back:

In *Powerful Fiction: An Interview with the Writers of Gaza Writes Back*, (2014) the profound realities of Palestinian suffering and enduring spirit are vividly portrayed, encapsulating both the emotional and physical turmoil endured by Gaza's inhabitants. Madeline Schaefer recounts her engaging dialogue with the young Palestinian writers and the book's editor, Refaat Alareer, who were on a national tour to advocate for their book and justice for Palestine. Aljamal particularly underscores the fusion of realism and fiction within the short stories, using them as a medium to convey the destruction wrought upon Palestinian homes by Israeli forces. Alareer posits that short stories are uniquely suited to narrate Gaza's historical and traumatic experiences, asserting that "literature transcends the news into human experience – it transcends times, transcends beliefs and ideologies" (MADEO, 2014, p, 7). For Aljamal, *Gaza Writes Back* represents his endeavor to articulate the experiences of Palestine through the power of narrative.

Madeline Schaefer's dialogue with Rawan Yaghi uncovers the deep frustration felt by Palestine's youth. Yaghi poignantly describes the constraints of Gaza's confined and narrow spaces, which hinder her ability to meet diverse people and broaden her horizons. Encouraged by Refaat Alareer, she feels compelled to document the sufferings of Gaza

through her writing. Yaghi also reflects on her motivation for writing about her brother, stating that it serves both as a tribute to him and a means to immortalize his story within the realm of fiction. In his interview with Madeline, Alareer articulates his rationale for selecting young writers over their older counterparts to narrate the stories of Palestine. He asserts that "young people are more active in building strategies and promoting campaigns against Israel" compared to the older generation, highlighting their dynamic role in advocating for justice and change.

In "Gaza Writes Back: Refaat Alareer Passes the Torch to Gazan Youth," (2024) Ayesha Yussuf illuminates the pivotal role of Palestinian women writers in nurturing resilience and offering profound insights into the harrowing realities faced by Gazans. *Gaza Writes Back* stands out for its powerful depiction of Israel's military assaults and the profound impact of Operation Cast Lead on Palestine. The book features the voices of fifteen writers, among whom female authors are prominently recognized. As Yussuf emphasizes, these Palestinian women have been instrumental in preserving and articulating Palestine's identity, underscoring their critical contribution to the narrative and resistance of their homeland.

Material and Methods

This paper adopts LaCapra's 'acting out' and 'working through' as theoretical frameworks to navigate trauma and systematic oppression culminating in a Palestinian holocaust. It supports the Palestinian literary fight back through the act of subversive storytelling that leads to individual and collective healing of the wounded Palestinian community.

Orchestrating a Palestinian Holocaust: Navigating Trauma and Healing through Subversive Storytelling in *Gaza Writes Back*

The stories within *Gaza Writes Back* serve as powerful testaments to the resilience and fortitude of their protagonists, revealing the intricate processes of trauma management and the manifestations of psychological distress. In "L for Life," the narrative centers on a girl who lost her father eleven years prior, yet remains trapped in the grip of that trauma. Alareer, in his article "Narrating Palestine," highlights the profound significance of this story, noting, "Hanan's story is my favorite and I chose to start the book with it" (Alareer, 2014, p, 529). He further describes Hanan's enduring anguish, emphasizing, "the agony of being fatherless, with an uncompleted story" (Alareer, 2014, p, 529). The story vividly portrays the war's devastating impact and Hanan's separation from her father. She recalls, "I cannot remember anything but his dusty, black boots and the frightening rifle" (Alareer, 2013, p, 29), illustrating how these haunting memories continuously revive her trauma and inflict persistent pain. The depiction of her emotional state underscores a profound sense of numbness and hopelessness, as the dire conditions in Gaza remain unchanged since her father's death. Hanan poignantly remarks, "breathing some good air has become a luxury we cannot always afford" (Alareer, 2013, p, 29), reflecting the pervasive and toxic environment of war. This enduring trauma exemplifies *acting out*, where the narrator remains ensnared by her unresolved grief. Her inability to move beyond the loss of her father is evident in her clinging to the last memory of him—a bedtime story abruptly interrupted when the soldier seized him from his bed. This incomplete narrative symbolizes the unending mourning and emotional paralysis that characterize her experience.

The trauma endured by a child in Gaza is illustrated through Hanan's harrowing experience of witnessing her father being violently seized by an Israeli soldier, whom she

describes as a 'huge creature.' The constant reminders of her past trauma within her home – such as the tiny mark of a gunshot left by the soldier who killed her father – serve as unrelenting symbols of her suffering. Hanan refers to this mark as an eyesore, emblematic of the painful memories that haunt her daily. As LaCapra asserts, "Traumas are not discrete occurrences that happen once and for all; they are seldom, if ever, completely mastered" (Rubenstein, 2024, p, 159). This perspective underscores that trauma is not a single event but an ongoing, complex process. The act of writing about such trauma emerges as a profound process of *working through*, a concept that crystallizes towards the conclusion of the story. Hanan's journey to Aunt Karama, driven by her urgent need to complete her father's unfinished story, marks a pivotal moment in her process of healing. Aunt Karama leads her to the ruins of Thaer's house and the olive tree Thaer had planted, now grown into a large, resilient tree. Despite her mother's attempt to convince her that Thaer died heroically while saving Amal, Hanan struggles with disbelief until she confronts the physical reality of the olive tree.

Hanan reflects, "That's seeds grew up. Nothing else was left, but the tree was enough for me, for Amal, for Thaer, and for you, my dearest Baba" (Alareer, 2013, p, 36). This statement reveals her conscious effort to reconcile with her traumatic past. Her journey – from seeking answers from her mother and grandfather to finally turning to Aunt Karama – demonstrates her gradual process of coming to terms with her unresolved grief. The 'incomplete story' of Thaer, akin to a knife in her heart, persists throughout the eleven years, marking her emotional and psychological struggle.

Haya Rabah's story "Scars" exemplifies the profound resilience and enduring losses experienced by Palestinians. The narrator, who is the sole survivor of her family, bears deep psychological and physical scars. Her survival triggers a persistent sense of guilt and self-recrimination, as she grapples with the trauma of her past. This guilt is exacerbated by her mother's admonition: "You are so selfish" (Alareer, 2013, p, 131). The narrator internalizes this critique, believing her desire to live constitutes a form of selfishness, as she reflects, "wanted life to be only for herself" (Alareer, 2013, p, 131). The narrator's view of her survival as a personal failing underscores the psychological impact of trauma. The act of recounting these traumatic events in her story acts as a mechanism of *acting out*, wherein she continuously revisits and re-experiences her suffering. This repetitive engagement with her past allows for a form of psychological processing and potential healing. As she acknowledges, "Things may sound peaceful if we do not think about them, but once we do, they evoke harsh memories in our minds" (Alareer, 2013, p, 133). This reflection highlights the intricate relationship between memory, trauma, and healing, revealing the complex process through which the narrator confronts and works through her past trauma.

The protagonist in Haya Rabah's "Scars" initially appears to be in denial about her trauma, unable to move past her painful past. Writing the story forces her to confront her suffering, revealing that the peace she had previously clung to was an illusion born of denial. Her reflection, "I became a girl with a scar" (Alareer, 2013, p, 133), poignantly encapsulates the profound pain she endures. The physical scar from her injuries serves as a constant, painful reminder of her family's death, and she grapples with feelings of guilt and selfishness for surviving. Her assertion that "They say wars end, but they never do, wars never end" (Alareer, 2013, p, 138) underscores her belief that the scars of trauma are permanent, reflecting how wars obliterate not just lives but the enduring sense of peace.

Despite the depth of her suffering, Rabah's narrative demonstrates remarkable resilience. The act of recounting her traumatic experiences requires a formidable strength, given the immense loss she describes – her mother, father, siblings, and children. The

story's conclusion reveals a significant shift: as she reflects on her past, she gradually emerges from denial. Her observation, "I told him trying to hide my scar. For a second, I felt it was getting smaller. It almost vanished" (Alareer, 2013, p, 140), symbolizes a critical moment of acceptance and healing. This transformation from denial to the process of *working through* her pain illustrates the protagonist's journey toward reconciling with her reality and finding a measure of peace amidst the enduring shadows of her past trauma.

Sulaiman's "One War Day" depicts the trauma and enduring spirit of Gaza through the protagonist Hamza's harrowing experiences. The narrative vividly portrays the fear and destruction wrought by war, encapsulating the resilience of the Palestinian people. Hamza's defiant assertion, "They may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom" (Alareer, 2013, p, 37), underscores the steadfast resistance against Israeli brutality. The story reflects LaCapra's concepts of *acting out* and *working through*, illustrating how trauma reoccurs and impacts present life. As LaCapra notes, "In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back in the past reliving the traumatic scene" (Rubenstein, 2024, p, 21), highlighting Hamza's ongoing struggle with his past. The story's climax, where Hamza faces a deafening blast and laments, "At least, you've got some life" (Alareer, 2013, p, 39), poignantly captures the grim reality of Gaza's plight and the stark uncertainty of survival. Hamza's eventual death, as he "failed again, expectedly" (Alareer, 2013, p, 41), symbolizes the broader resistance against oppression and the relentless struggle for freedom.

Yaghi's "Spared" explores the psychological impact of violence on Gazan children, emphasizing the role of storytelling in processing trauma. As Alareer notes, "Stories are the much-needed talent for life" (Alareer, 2013, p, 4), reflecting the significance of narrative in shaping identities and understanding trauma. LaCapra describes this as an "articulatory practice," where "working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate effect and representation" to counteract repetitive trauma (Rubenstein, 2024, p, 42). In "Spared," children playing football fall victim to an Israeli attack, illustrating the profound fears and lasting impact of violence. The story portrays the stark shift in the narrator's life following a sudden blast: "In a second, a huge light flashed... and I was thrown back to the wall" (Alareer, 2013, p, 44). The narrator's trauma is compounded by the loss of friends and the desolation of Gaza, culminating in the cessation of childhood games and the irreversible change in their lives: "No more games were played... they wouldn't come out to play" (Alareer, 2013, p, 45). Yaghi's narrative exposes the brutality of Israel's attacks and the deep psychological scars left on children in Gaza.

In the evocative tapestry of *Gaza Writes Back*, a constellation of youthful Palestinian voices – Alareer, Ali, Rabah, Habashi, and Suliman – craft a poignant counter-narrative to the pervasive sense of victimhood that pervades their homeland's contemporary experience. Their works are not mere recounting of trauma but rather, potent acts of resistance against an overarching sense of disempowerment. Ali's *The Story of Land* deals with a heartrending portrayal of a father whose love for his land and olive trees transcends the ordinary. For him, these trees are not mere vegetation; they are embodiments of Palestine's enduring resilience and dignity. Through the father's reflections, the narrative asserts, "By uprooting plants and cutting trees, Israel tries to break the bond and impose its own rules of despair on Palestinians. By replanting their trees over and over again, Palestinians are rejecting Israel's rules. 'My Land, my rules,' says Dad" (Alareer, 2021, p, 178). This assertion vividly illustrates a profound defiance against the forces seeking to erode Palestinian identity and sovereignty. Drawing on LaCapra's notion of memory as an act of working through, the story reveals the role of traumatic memories in resurrecting lost connections and identities. The narrator delves into the intricate relationship between the father's memory and the trauma of the past, portraying the revival of the land's memory as a means to reanimate the father's presence: "It was the memory of the Land

being revived that brought him back. It was the memory of olive trees giving that...belonging" (Alareer, 2013, p, 55). This narrative lens does more than just mourn the physical destruction inflicted upon Palestine's sacred lands and olive trees by Israeli military actions; it also illuminates the tenacious spirit of a people who, despite the odds, persist in reclaiming and cherishing their heritage.

Conclusion

In *Gaza Writes Back*, the resilience of Palestinians amid extreme adversity, as mediated through the act of memory, becomes a testament to their defiance and bravery in the face of Israeli violence. The collection underscores the necessity of traversing specific processes to accept the past and manage trauma. Through an exploration of coping and healing, some stories conclude in devastation without offering a path to recovery, others reveal an ongoing battle with trauma that persists even after the narrative is laid bare. This paper amplifies the voices often silenced and brings to light the harsh realities that frequently elude Western media's portrayal of Palestine as the villain. The interplay of working through and acting out mirrors the psychological and emotional states of the writers, establishing literature as a crucial instrument for processing both individual and collective trauma.

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