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**READING TRAUMA. AN
EXPLORATION OF NELSON
LOWHIM’S WAR NARRATIVES**

Rezumatul tezei de doctorat

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Within the realm of literary analysis, the exploration of trauma theory has emerged as a vital avenue for understanding the profound impact of traumatic experiences on characters, narrative structures, and reader engagement. This thesis represents a comprehensive examination of trauma theory and its application to the works of contemporary American writer Nelson Lowhim. As the author of this thesis, I have meticulously traversed the interconnected landscape of psychology, literature, and cultural studies to illuminate the intricate nuances of trauma and its portrayal within Lowhim's novels.

By employing a concatenated approach, I have sought to unify psychological perspectives with literary analysis, allowing for a deep exploration of trauma within its interdisciplinary context. The chapters that follow represent the culmination of extensive research and analysis, aimed at unravelling the complexities of trauma theory within Nelson Lowhim's narratives.

Within the realm of contemporary literature, Nelson Lowhim has emerged as a prominent author, captivating readers with a remarkable body of work.

Here is an insightful overview of Lowhim's literary contributions by delving into a comprehensive bibliographic review of his books. Ranging from thought-provoking short stories like *Just Smile* (2011), *The Creatures Within* (2012), *Run* (2012), *Cleanse the Soul* (2012), *A Cabin Tale* (2012), and *To Love a Rat* (2012) to gripping novels including *Citymuse* (2012), *The Struggle Trilogy* (2012), *The Labyrinth of Souls* (2015), and *Ministry of Bombs* (2013), Lowhim's publications showcase his versatility and imaginative prowess. By embarking on this exploration, readers gain a deeper understanding of Lowhim's narrative style, thematic exploration, and his invaluable impact on the contemporary literary landscape. This exploration allows for the recognition of the multifaceted nature of Lowhim's writing, as it emerges, painting a vivid picture of an author who continually pushes the boundaries of storytelling and captivates readers with his thought-provoking narratives.

Given the extensive body of work produced by Lowhim, conducting a comprehensive analysis of his entire literary repertoire would have been an unfeasible

endeavour. Therefore, this academic investigation focuses on a selection of some of his works to facilitate a rigorous examination of Lowhim's writing. The following texts have been carefully scrutinized: *Ministry of Bombs* (MB, 2013), *The Creatures Within* (CW, 2012), *Cleanse the Soul* (CS, 2012), *Run* (Run, 2012) and *The Struggle Trilogy* (TST, 2012). By delving into these specific works, this analysis aims at providing a comprehensive exploration of Lowhim's recurring themes, narrative techniques, and the overarching artistic vision manifested within his writing.

CHAPTER I. Concatenated Theories of Trauma. From Psychology to Literature

Speaking from a socio-cultural standpoint, the world suffered intense pain from the beginning of time. Trauma was a subject of writing long before it came to be known as a critical trend. In other words, trauma existed – both in life and literature – long before it was scientifically recognized and long before it came to be known as a cultural or literary trend since our ancestors

“must have suffered from traumatic stress, just as modern trauma victims do” (Morrissey, 2021: eBook). *Writing about trauma* has a historical dimension in the sense that its goal is to recreate the past as objectively as possible. *Writing trauma* is a metaphor in the sense that it denotes some distance from the moment of the occurrence of trauma.

The significance of Caruth’s “small body of work” remains “extremely influential” (Luckhurst, 2008: 5) in the way she develops and updates Freudian notions in accordance with deconstructionist and poststructuralist reading practices. Citing Seltzer, Luckhurst enforces that “modernity has come to be understood under the sign of the wound,” namely “the modern subject has become inseparable from the categories of shock and trauma” (Luckhurst, 2008: 20, qtd. Seltzer, 1997: 18).

Morrissey concludes the first chapter of his book with seven main ideas regarding trauma theory, the following being the most relevant for the present research: “a linguistic record is, in essence, a psychological record as well and [...] linguistic analysis

can unlock our understanding of the psyche,” “group psychology operates in much the same way as individual psychology,” “communal moods can be passed from one generation to the next, and from one geographical region to another,” a place may be a generator of trauma, PTSD is a key element, and integrating traumatic memory into narrative memory helps relieving trauma. He also emphasizes that “for the traumatized, the unreality of the traumatic event collides with or overlaps, unbidden, day-to-day reality” (Morrissey, 2021: eBook).

Trauma is an interdisciplinary field. Just as Luckhurst emphasizes, “trauma is always a breaching of disciplines” (2008: 4). The studies regarding trauma unite several disciplines including psychology, philosophy, or social and community assistants. A multitude of fields of study should be considered not only to get a better understanding of the topic, but also to be able to conduct an analysis in itself. LaCapra states that “no genre or discipline ‘owns’ trauma” (2001: 96) and I would add that, despite this fact, it belongs to everybody as it *can* and it *does* affect all

social classes, despite their religious beliefs, gender or age.

Traumatic memory and the question of witnessing are also important landmarks in trauma theory. Morrissey notes that “traumatic memory is very erratic meaning that victims of traumatic stress often repress or dissociate their recollection of the source event itself” (2021: eBook). To some, “there are many levels of remembering and preserving the horror of atrocity” (Laub&Auerhahn 2017: 40), and every subject of trauma has his own way of expressing the atrocity of their lives. To others, trauma is so overwhelming that they cannot talk about it. Cârstea calls this phenomenon “traumatized speechlessness” and it defines what is “too horrible to speak of, ineffable or beyond the expressive power of language” (2014: 28).

There are numerous views regarding trauma, and the contexture of trauma shall not be hemmed soon for, in spite of some general points, each subject of trauma has his own way of answering atrocities. Trauma is paradoxical and interdisciplinary: some may

find their voice, others might lose it; to some, trauma is a once-in-a-lifetime event, to others it happens on a daily basis, and although no discipline owns trauma, it permeates everyone's life.

CHAPTER II. Reading Lowhim's Ministry of Bombs via the Caruthian Model of Trauma

Nelson Lowhim's *Ministry of Bombs* tackles three distinct characters and refers explicitly to the traumas that each of them has experienced. The society in which we live is marked by the ubiquitous presence of hate and prejudice, and each individual in this story symbolizes a different part of this reality.

It is remarkable to observe how Lowhim has created the personalities of the three protagonists: Dr. Noklar, Ali, and Justice, particularly the representation of the tensions that exist inside each of them. The reader is given a glimpse into the inner thoughts of each individual thanks to an omniscient narrator. It is apparent that the traumatic events that individuals have gone through have altered them, and it is also implied that they continue to evolve even when new traumatic

experiences come their way. The inability of the character to integrate the traumatic experience and the disconnect between the individual's moral principles, society, and the people they meet along their trips are the root causes of the internal problems that manifest themselves in the story. Because each of the characters is the product of a vicious circle, none of them are to be blamed for the way that they react. At some point in their lives, each of these characters has been through a traumatic experience, and now, as a direct result of that experience, they are leading other characters to go through traumatic experiences. For instance, Justice was deeply affected by the events of September 11 and, as a result, he uses unconventional approaches to gather knowledge that might help avert a catastrophe of a similar scale in the future. Ali detonates explosives in cafes in an effort to drive the Americans out of his nation, as he holds them responsible for destroying his country.

Therefore, *Ministry of Bombs* excellently illustrates all the war trauma, i.e. struggles, both internal and external, that take place over the course of

an armed conflict. Since the armed war is taking place on a larger scale, the internal conflicts are taking place within the innermost part of each individual character.

CHAPTER III. An Interdisciplinary Approach to Trauma Theory. Reading Lowhim's Short Stories

This chapter questions both how the posttraumatic self is portrayed in a narrative and how the traumatised self is tackled. The posttraumatic self is revealed by the anonymous narrator of *The Creatures Within*, who is haunted by ghosts that take the form of insects that randomly storm his present existence. In order to prevent the insects from appearing, the narrator is compelled to abandon his ordinary, everyday existence. M. is the protagonist of the short story *Cleanse the Soul* and the character that undergoes extreme physical trauma that forces him to commit suicide in the end. Therefore, trauma is not just a mental and physical pain, but a factor that, unless controlled, steals the lives of the traumatized.

Both analyses have shown “how trauma becomes text” and “how wound becomes voice”

(Berger, 1997: 9). The relationship between experience and representation was exploited interdisciplinary and cross-culturally, tackling issues such as religion, politics, philosophy and psychology. The characters that experience trauma are dominated by loneliness, incomprehensibility and a general feeling of being overwhelmed both by the world around them, and implicitly, by their own mental processes. Whatever the characters wish to do in order to address and attempt to alleviate their distress, trauma does not seem just more powerful, but it even grows in intensity with each such individual effort. To use Forter's psychoanalytic understanding of trauma, we may state that both characters exhibit the consequences of "an event so overwhelming and inassimilable that the self responds by absencing itself from direct experience of the event" (in Balaev, 2014: 70). According to Van der Kolk, "psychological trauma invariably occurs in a social context involving either the loss of attachment figure or the destruction of the basic sense of security and continuity that results from accumulated secured experiences with others" (2003: 153). For instance, to

M., the *attachment figure* might be considered the interviewer, whereas for the narrator of *The Creatures Within*, the creatures are in fact representations of his experiences with others.

Therefore, the focus of both short tales is the recounting of traumatic events that reflect trauma characteristics from both the perpetrators and the victims' perspectives. Nelson Lowhim's ability for narrating trauma is highly refined, as he is able to depict not only the physical pain that his characters endure, but also to delve into the psychological trauma of his characters and bring their emotions to the front. The analysis has shown the "enigmatic relation between trauma and survival" and underscored that "for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis" (Caruth, 1995: 9).

CHAPTER IV. Showcasing the Traumatogenical Conflict in The Struggle Trilogy: An Interdisciplinary Analysis

The Struggle Trilogy is a literary work that pays homage to humanity and those who served in Iraq. The novel is divided into three parts. The first chapter, which is also the opening quote, reads: “the struggle knows not the logic of morals,” acknowledging the messy and unpredictable nature of fighting for a just cause. It highlights the difficult decisions and bold actions that may be necessary to achieve the larger goal, even if they may not always align with conventional notions of morality or ethics.

This literary analysis employs an interdisciplinary approach to explore the theme of trauma in *The Struggle Trilogy*. By utilizing a range of theoretical frameworks and concepts, Freud’s theory of the unconscious mind, Caruth’s notion of unclaimed experience, Judith Herman’s trauma theory, van der Kolk’s work on trauma and its impact on mental health, Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory, and Bandura’s concept of moral disengagement, a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which individuals and communities respond to and cope with traumatic experiences is achieved.

Through the deconstruction of war sounds and analysis of the characters' reactions to trauma, this analysis sheds light on how the text explores the impact of traumatogenic conflict. The examination of how trauma manifests within the body and its effect on mental health adds another layer to the exploration of trauma in the text. Additionally, the role of group identity and intergroup conflict in shaping experiences of trauma is explored.

The concept of moral disengagement is also examined as a mechanism for coping with traumatic events. By exploring these different theoretical frameworks and concepts, a more comprehensive understanding of the text's exploration of trauma is accomplished, highlighting the complex nature of trauma and its impact on individuals and societies.

This interdisciplinary analysis offers a multi-dimensional exploration of the themes depicted in *The Struggle Trilogy*, bringing together insights from different fields of study to deepen our understanding of the complex nature of trauma. It underscores the importance of a holistic approach to understanding

trauma, one that considers not only the psychological and physiological impacts but also the social and cultural contexts in which it occurs.

The novel paints a nuanced picture of life during the American military presence in Iraq. It emphasizes the ever-shifting alliances and enmities, along with a constant sense of danger. The exploration of socio-political dynamics and the psychological impact of conflict provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between individuals, power, and trauma.

The application of theoretical frameworks and insights provided by esteemed scholars such as Albert Bandura, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra significantly enhances our understanding of the psychological dimensions presented in *The Struggle Trilogy*. Their scholarly contributions have shed light on various aspects of human behaviour, trauma, and the moral complexities inherent in situations of conflict and violence. By integrating their contributions, we demonstrate a commitment to rigorous scholarly inquiry and the incorporation of established theories

and frameworks that have advanced our understanding of human behaviour in contexts of conflict and violence.

Through the novel, Nelson Lowhim delves into the inner turmoil experienced by terrorists as they grapple with the conflict between their beliefs and their role as perpetrators of violence. The concepts of moral disengagement and cognitive dissonance are utilized to explain the struggles faced by characters like Walid, Ahmed and Qassem. Ahmed's difficulty in performing his job and Qassem's attempt to justify their actions are both manifestations of these psychological processes.

The passages vividly portray the fear, uncertainty, and horror of war. They shed light on the psychological concepts of fear and trust, demonstrating how war can erode the human spirit. The ever-present theme of death and decay emphasizes the stark reality faced by individuals in a war-torn environment, where survival becomes contingent upon the ability to adapt to constantly changing circumstances. Through the lens of trauma and power dynamics, the novel highlights the

psychological complexities and challenges faced by individuals immersed in the chaos of war.

The analysis delves into the psychological implications of Walid's character and actions within the novel. It examines the psychological underpinnings of Walid's character by exploring concepts such as moral disengagement, the need for power, and cognitive dissonance. Walid's violent actions demonstrate moral disengagement, as he distances himself from the moral implications of his behaviour to maintain power and control.

The novel demonstrates how individuals grapple with the clash between their personal values and the actions required of them in war or terrorist activities. They highlight the psychological struggles that arise when individuals are forced to justify or rationalize violence, and the impact of trauma on their beliefs, behaviours, and mental health. Moreover, the analysis sheds light on the moral implications and ethical considerations that accompany acts of violence, as well as the power dynamics and social influences that shape individuals' decision-making.

In lieu of a conclusion

Throughout the thesis, a concatenated approach is employed, unifying psychological perspectives with literary analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of trauma within its interdisciplinary context. By traversing the interconnected landscape of psychology, literature, and cultural studies, this thesis offers valuable insights into trauma theory and its manifestation in Nelson Lowhim's narratives, contributing to the ongoing scholarly discourse on trauma and literature.