Narrating trauma in women's literature

Exploring South Sudan and Darfur in *Arwāḥ Iddū* ('Edo's Souls') by Istīlā Qāytānū and 'Tears of the desert' by Ḥalīmah Bašīr

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This article examines the lived experiences of women in South Sudan and Darfur, the coping mechanisms they developed in response to wartime trauma, and the ways these experiences are both shaped by and reflected in the traumatic literature authored by Sudanese women. These writers made the deliberate decision to leave their homeland in pursuit of safety and peace, yet they continue to bear witness to their nation's suffering through their narratives. The article explores the impact of trauma not only as a lived condition but also as a critical framework through which Sudanese women's literature can be interpreted.

At the core of this inquiry is an analysis of the deeply painful and often shocking experiences endured by women, as well as the burdensome social roles and expectations imposed upon them during both war and so-called peace. It foregrounds the harmful cultural attitudes that hold women accountable for conflicts they neither initiated nor controlled—resulting in shame, isolation, and the fragmentation of family and community. The article contends that the years of violence in Darfur and South Sudan have given rise to a powerful body of literature authored by women displaced from their homes and histories. Trauma and violence, it argues, function not only as thematic concerns but as structural forces that shape the very form and expression of these narratives. Trauma becomes a reciprocal force—both the subject of and the lens through which women's war literature in the Sudanese context is written and understood.

Keywords: trauma, war time rape, trauma theory, South Sudan, Darfur, memory, identity.

1. Fragments of a nation: Sudan's historical and social trajectory

Before the onset of British-Egyptian colonial rule in 1899, Sudan was not a monolithic entity but a vibrant and decentralized constellation of kingdoms, sultanates, tribal communities, and religious orders. These diverse societies were marked by intricate systems of local governance, inter-ethnic cooperation, and cultural pluralism. Contrary to later colonial narratives, precolonial Sudan was home to longstanding traditions of religious coexistence and more nuanced gender dynamics, in which women often held economic, spiritual, and social influence within their communities. Political

interaction operated not through rigid bureaucracies, but through fluid alliances and localized forms of authority grounded in both indigenous customs and Islamic jurisprudence.

However, the advent of colonialism radically reconfigured these systems. Through imposed administrative centralization, racial classification, and legal codification, colonial powers not only disrupted traditional governance structures but also entrenched ethnic divisions, restricted women's roles, and redefined religious identities. These transformations laid the groundwork for many of Sudan's post-independence struggles, from protracted civil wars to the marginalization of women and minority groups.[1] Since gaining independence from Egypt in 1956, Sudan has experienced a turbulent history marked by recurring political instability, military coups, and internal conflicts.[2]

The conflict in Sudan pits the Sudanese military, police, and the Janjaweed militia—composed largely of Arabized indigenous Africans and some Bedouin from the northern Rizeigat tribe—against rebel groups such as the Sudan Liberation Movement and the Justice and Equality Movement, whose fighters are primarily drawn from non-Arab Muslim ethnic groups including the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit. Although the Sudanese government officially denies supporting the Janjaweed, substantial evidence suggests it provided funding, weapons, and coordinated attacks that often targeted civilians. During this period, the Janjaweed reportedly sought to expel African Christians from the South and seize control of fertile land. Many men and boys fleeing from the predominantly Christian South to the North—whether voluntarily or by force—faced exploitative labor conditions and were compelled to erase their identities, often being forced to adopt new Arabic names and convert to Islam (Berridge 2023, Malwal 2015 and Naṣr 2018). Additionally, there were ongoing conflicts between Arab and African communities in Darfur, Western Sudan.[3]

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[1] For further analysis, refer to Bona Malwal, Sudan and South Sudan: From One to Two (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). For a more detailed discussion of women's roles in precolonial Sudan, see Ishraqah Mustafa Hamad, Bil-Kitābah Nataʿāfā: Nājiyāt Min Ḥarb as-Sūdān (Khartoum: Dār al-Muṣawwarāt, 2025)

[2] The roots of the conflict lay in unresolved tensions in the southern region, which remained part of Sudan despite the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, intended to grant the South autonomy and end hostilities (Collins and Al Shahi 2024). Long-standing political, ethnic, and religious divisions—compounded by marginalization, resource disputes, and cultural repression by the northern-led government—fueled decades of civil war (Sikainga *et al.* 2025). Although the agreement brought a temporary ceasefire, conflict resumed in the 1980s, culminating in the second civil war (1983–2005).

[3] The war in Darfur, which started in 2003, persisted even after South Sudan's independence. The Sudanese government, led by President Omar al-Bashir, continued its military campaigns against rebel groups in Darfur. Various peace efforts were attempted, including the Doha Peace Agreement (2011) and later the Juba Peace Agreement (2020), but fighting and ethnic violence have continued in different parts of Darfur. In 2019, Omar al-Bashir was overthrown, leading to hopes for stability. However, tensions between different factions in Sudan, including the military and paramilitary groups, have kept Darfur unstable, resulting in ulterior chaos. Moreover, the 2023 war between Sudan's army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has led to renewed violence in Darfur, with reports of massacres, ethnic killings, and humanitarian crises. The RSF, which has its

One of the crucial turning points that ignited the Second Sudanese Civil War occurred in 1983, when President Gaafar Mohamed Nimeiri imposed Sharia Law—known as the September Laws—across the entire country, including the predominantly non-Muslim South. The Sudanese people witnessed his transformation into a self-styled religious leader, who began forbidding all forms of 'sins that were committed in the past.'[4]

This decision not only violated the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 but also deepened religious and political divisions, triggering a renewed outbreak of civil war. These laws sparked widespread anger among Southern Sudanese, who felt that the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of the nation was being erased. The regime labeled Southern populations as infidels and enemies of the Islamic nation. Many activists, student union leaders, artists, journalists, and poets who opposed the regime were abducted or mysteriously disappeared, further intensifying resistance and resentment. The resulting civil war lasted over two decades and ultimately led to the deaths of an estimated two million people (Collins 2008).

These brutal events reverberate in contemporary women's literature; this study therefore investigates how the traumas endured by two Sudanese writers, Ḥalīmah Bašīr and Istīlā Qāytānū (both born in 1979), shape the very texture of their narratives. As women from conflict-affected regions, they bear witness from an embodied, first-person standpoint—inscribing onto the page wounds felt on their own skin.

2. Trauma and memory: The resonance of Arab women's narratives in trauma literature

Trauma in postcolonial literature is often not a single event, but an intergenerational condition—reverberating through time as a layered, systemic, and embodied experience. This study draws on the growing body of decolonial trauma theory that critiques Euro-American models for their failure to

roots in the Janjaweed militias (responsible for atrocities in Darfur), now controls large parts of the region. Currently, Darfur remains deeply troubled, with ongoing ethnic conflicts, displacement, and a humanitarian crisis. Many people have fled to Chad and other neighboring countries. The region is still part of Sudan, but its future remains uncertain due to the ongoing war (Collins 2008).

[4] All imported wine bottles were confiscated from shops, bars and warehouses and smashed on the asphalt road. The river Nile was flooded with the red and shimmering liquid. According to newspapers, junior soldiers seized some of the surviving wine crates in abandoned places, and drank what they could. Then they returned to the battlefield screaming "Sharia! Sharia law till death." The new laws mandated the closure of brothels, banned prostitution, condemned drunkenness and extramarital sex, and filled the prisons with dissidents labeled infidels and heretics. Other military officers who attempted further coups met their end in remote graves in the wilderness, guilty of treason and rebellion. The process for the Islamization of the nation had torn apart the fabric of society. The South Sudanese were not deemed citizens in this country.

adequately represent the complex, gendered, and collective dimensions of trauma in Arab and Middle Eastern countries. As Stef Craps (2013) argues, dominant trauma paradigms tend to universalize experiences rooted in Western history—most notably the Holocaust—while marginalizing the structural and colonial violence that shapes trauma in postcolonial contexts.

Similarly, Sonya Andermahr (2016) advocates for a reorientation of trauma studies that centers historically and geographically specific frameworks, especially in African, Middle Eastern, and diasporic literature. A great deal of scholarship has addressed the trauma narratives in Arab women writers such as (cooke 2007, Al-Samman 2015, Bianco 2023, Alammar (2023). While these scholars have opened up important avenues for understanding trauma in various Arab contexts, scholarly studies that focus specifically on Sudanese women's narratives and their lived experiences of trauma remain limited. In the Darfur context, Noah R. Bassil (2015) and Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf (2002, 2009, 2021) examine the intersections of violence, colonial legacies, and gendered trauma. From the South Sudan perspective, Lydia Wanja Gitau (2018) and Akuch Kuol Anyieth (2024) offer trauma-sensitive analyses of refugee and intergenerational trauma affecting women. However, few of these studies engage directly with literary or autobiographical accounts, leaving a critical gap in the scholarship on gendered representations of war and memory.

This article adopts a lens informed by Annemarie Pabel's work on Arab women's trauma narratives and Bell Hooks's intersectional feminist perspective on healing and resistance. Together, these thinkers provide a critical structure through which to understand trauma in the works of Istīlā Qāytānū and Ḥalīmah Bashīr—not as discrete psychological ruptures, but as ongoing, intersectional experiences shaped by race, color, regional identity, religion, gender, and the entangled histories of colonialism, war, and forced displacement offering a counter-discourse to Western notions of trauma and recovery.

3. Sudanese women's testimonies and narratives

Through a comparative reading of Halima Bashir's (Ḥalīmah Bašīr) memoir co-authored with journalist Damien Lewis *Tears of the Desert* (Bashir 2008) and Istīlā Qāytānū's debut novel *Arwāḥ Iddū* (Qāytānū 2018; translated in English in 2023 by Sawād Husayn as *Edo's Souls*, with the author as Stella Gaitano), this study investigates how both authors articulate trauma not as an individual psychological rupture but as a layered, intersectional experience shaped by gender, war, racial hierarchies, cultural displacement, and authoritarian rule. Both authors—Sudanese women born in 1979—bear personal witness to atrocities endured during the Darfur genocide and the Second Sudanese Civil War. Their

narratives document the systemic use of rape, domestic violence, and militarized patriarchy as tools of war, while also highlighting the endurance and political agency of women who choose to testify.

Through their narrative strategies and testimonial voices, Qāytānū and Bašīr offer alternative ways of expressing and witnessing trauma that resist Western paradigms, calling instead for a decolonized, embodied, and culturally grounded understanding of women's suffering and survival in Arab contexts such as Sudan.

Actually, their style of writing and documentation aligns with protest literature, grounded in its three core pillars: empathy, shock value, and symbolic action. The impact of traumatic events on an individual's memory deeply shapes their sense of identity, while the resulting shock fosters growing empathy for others facing similar overwhelming odds. As drawn by Leuschner (2019) the literature of protest plays a crucial role in shaping our memory of conflict. Unlike media or historical representations, which often invite passive consumption, protest literature immerses us in the lived experiences of those affected. It enables a deeper, more empathetic engagement, allowing us to distinguish between works produced in the immediacy of conflict and those that retrospectively shape collective memory in the following years. This dynamic is powerfully reflected in Qāytānū's *Edo's Souls* and Bašīr's *Tears of the Desert*, where personal testimony becomes a vehicle for collective witnessing. Both texts rely on visceral imagery, emotional resonance, and symbolic resistance to confront silence, evoke empathy, and inscribe women's trauma into public memory.

Through their writing—often categorized as literature of disaster or trauma (cf. Blanchot **(**1995) and Morton 2020)—Bašīr and Qāytānū recount the oppressive lives they endured before being forced to flee their beloved homeland. Both women sought refuge abroad, choosing not to let their traumatic pasts define them negatively. Instead, they used their narratives to expose the overlooked atrocities committed in Darfur and South Sudan. In doing so, they also highlight how women's lives are shaped by familial expectations and the rigid rules imposed by society, especially under wartime atrocities and authoritarian regimes.

The two authors recount a segment of the history of a nation ravaged by civil wars and recurring military coups driven by infiltrating party members. Throughout the history of Sudan after the independence, various factions within the armed forces had backed different movements, leading to numerous casualties among soldiers and civilians alike. Each conflict resulted in the loss of lives, leaving behind grieving wives and shattered families. The cities were always permeated by the smell of gunpowder, with burning cars at every turn. The collateral damage was always extensive, unending and repetitive.

The memoir *Tears of the Desert* focuses on Darfur, Sudan, during the outbreak of the Darfur conflict, which began in 2003. The conflict involved the Sudanese government and the Janjaweed militia targeting non-Arab populations in Darfur, resulting in mass killings, rape, and displacement. The Arab Janjaweed Militia used killing and rape as war tools to terrify Darfuris and to eliminate them all as a community.[5]

Arwāḥ Iddū is set between the late 1960s and the 2010s. The story focuses on South Sudan during and after the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), extending into the post-independence period following the country's secession in 2011. Through vivid storytelling, Qāytānū captures the lingering trauma of war, the struggles of displacement, and the search for identity in a fragile nation.

Actually, the titular character, Iddū (Edo in the English translation) symbolizes resilience amidst the horrifying trauma of war, and the story recounts the immediate post-war disorientation and the search for stability in a fragile new nation. Moreover, the author of *Tears of the Desert* and Jalāʾ, one of the main female characters of Qāytānū's novel, are two empowered ladies fighting for the rights of other women facing injustice, wartime rape, domestic violence and discrimination.[6]

Both authors documented and captured the horrific events that have particularly affected women. They are creating an archive to ensure that the world is aware of what had happened and to what extent it had devastated the future of the Sudanese people which proves that committed narrating can offer a memory documentation for witnessed atrocities and the consequences of political violence. Similarly, Righi (2023) argues that the rupture of collective memory gives rise to a form of narration marked by displacement and disorientation, reflecting the deep psychological and social fractures caused by violence and exile.

4. The making of a narrative: The authors' backgrounds and the core themes of the novels

The literary works of Bašīr and Qāytānū are deeply rooted in their lived experiences as Sudanese women shaped by war, migration, and marginalization. Their personal trajectories directly inform the themes, characters, and narrative structures of their respective works.

[5] For more information on the Darfur conflict: United Nations International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur, Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General (25 January 2005), paras. II, 241–243, and 337–339.

[6] The name Jalā symbolizes liberation and freedom from oppression. In *Arwāḥ Iddū* ('Edo's Souls,' 2018), Jalāʾ is portrayed as a lawyer who advocates for women's emancipation and agency. She also defends the rights of those persecuted for their political beliefs.

Ḥalīmah Bašīr is a Sudanese author, physician, and human rights activist, best known for her memoir *Tears of the Desert: A Memoir of Survival in Darfur*. Born into the Zaghawa people in the western deserts of Sudan, she benefited from an exceptional education thanks to her politically aware father, who ensured she attended a privileged school far from her rural origins. By the age of 24, she became her village's first formally qualified doctor.

However, her professional accomplishments could not shield her from the escalating violence in Darfur. During the conflict, the Janjaweed militias—often supported by Sudanese military forces—carried out brutal assaults against the Zaghawa people. In early 2004, they attacked Bašīr's village and surrounding areas, committing heinous acts, including the rape of 42 schoolgirls and their teachers. Bašīr treated the young victims, some as young as eight, and felt compelled to speak out. Her decision to report these atrocities to United Nations officials led to her kidnapping, detention by the Arab militia, and gang rape.

Following her release, Bašīr's father arranged her marriage to her cousin, Sharif, a man chosen for his progressive views. Despite the trauma they both endured—including the destruction of their village and the loss of loved ones—the couple faced their challenges together. Ultimately, fearing for her safety, Bašīr fled Sudan and sought asylum in the United Kingdom, where she continued her advocacy work.

Bašīr authored *Tears of the Desert* in exile. The memoir offers a harrowing firsthand account of the Darfur genocide, aiming to raise international awareness and call for justice (Large 2008). Her courage has earned global recognition. In 2010, she received the Anna Politkovskaya Award for her outspoken stance against the violence in Darfur and later testified before the International Criminal Court against Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir (ʻUmar al-Bašīr), who was indicted for crimes against humanity.

Bašīr has emphasized that those who experience trauma often feel compelled to recount it—transforming personal pain into collective memory. She has repeatedly stated that she writes out of necessity, believing that autobiographical storytelling and the fictionalization of lived experience serve as forms of emotional liberation and protection against erasure (Tembo 2018).

In *Tears of the Desert*, Bašīr recounts a journey defined by fear, resistance, and survival. Her raw and powerful testimony stands as a testament to individual resilience in the face of brutality—and as a vital contribution to the collective memory of the Darfur crisis.

In a different yet related narrative, *Arwāḥ Iddū* delved into the Sudan Civil War, exploring the contrasts between the North and the South. The novel received the PEN Translates award in 2020. *Husayn* made it accessible to a broader audience in English language. [7]

Qāytānū, born in 1979 in Khartoum, Sudan, is a prominent Sudanese author of South Sudanese descent. Her parents were originally from South Sudan but had sought refuge in Khartoum during the civil war of the 1960s (Snaije 2023). Raised in a multilingual environment, she spoke Latuka at home and Sudanese Arabic with friends, while receiving formal education in classical Arabic and English at the University of Khartoum, where she pursued a degree in pharmacy and discovered her passion for literature and storytelling. Her writing is profoundly influenced by themes of displacement, identity, and resilience. She began her literary career with short stories that vividly depict the struggles of marginalized communities in Sudan, focusing on themes such as war, displacement, poverty, and cultural rituals.

Her first short story collection, *Zuhūr Dhābila (*'Withered Flowers,' 2002), delves into the lives of individuals displaced by conflicts in southern Sudan, Darfur, and the Nuba Mountains, highlighting their struggles in camps near Khartoum. In 2003, she published the short story *Buḥayra bi-ḥajm thamarat bābāyā* ('A Lake the Size of a Papaya Fruit'), which won the prestigious Ali El-Mek Award in Sudan.

In 2012, following the independence of South Sudan, Qāytānū relocated to Juba, the capital of the young nation. However, the country's political instability and ongoing conflicts forced her to leave once again. By 2022, she relocated to Germany as a fellow of the PEN Germany Writer in Exile program, where she continues her literary and activist work. Her next collection, *Al- 'Awda* ('The Return,' 2018), portrays the experiences of South Sudanese returning to their newly formed nation, capturing both their aspirations and subsequent disappointments. This collection explored themes of displacement, identity, and the socio-political challenges faced by South Sudanese people.

Building on these early explorations of displacement and fractured identity, Qāytānū's literary evolution culminates in her first novel, *Arwāḥ Iddū*, on which this study is focused. The novel represents a multigenerational epic that delves into the lives of its characters against the backdrop of Sudanese history and culture. The novel intricately weaves themes of motherhood, identity, love, and loss, set against the tumultuous events of the 1970s and 1980s in both rural and urban Sudan. Qāytānū's

[7] Sawād Husayn, the translator of *Arwāḥ Iddū*, is an award-winning Arabic-English literary translator with an MA in Arabic literature from the School of Oriental and African Studies. She has translated other notable works, including *Catalogue of a Private Life* by Najwá Bin Shaṭwān, published by Dedalus Books in 2021. See in this respect Gaitano (2023).

rich descriptions bring to life the daily experiences and cultural practices of her characters, offering readers a profound insight into Sudanese society. The novel serves as a powerful commentary on the struggles of Sudanese and South Sudanese people, portraying the deep scars left by war and displacement.

Arwāḥ Iddū (*Edo's Souls*) follows the lives of several interconnected characters whose paths are shaped by political persecution and social upheaval. One such character is Peter, a Christian child whose father is lost in the regime's prison system. In the aftermath, Peter is entrusted by his mother to the care of a Muslim family, not out of estrangement but as a means of survival. Despite their religious differences, Peter is embraced as a true son. He grows up alongside his foster siblings, eventually helping the father run the family business. This depiction of interfaith solidarity stands in quiet contrast to the wider national tensions between Muslim and Christian communities, illustrating the possibility of coexistence and mutual care even in the face of war.

Feminist themes also play a central role in the novel, particularly concerning the status of women in both Muslim and Christian societies. The narrative confronts issues such as female circumcision, deeply rooted superstitions surrounding death, and spiritual beliefs about the floating of souls. Through these elements, the novel offers a textured and empathetic portrait of life in Sudan and South Sudan.

At the heart of *Arwāḥ Iddū*, Qāytānū constructs a poignant narrative of resilience, loss, and love set against the backdrop of a war-torn Sudan. The story opens with Iddū, a woman haunted by the repeated loss of her children through death and miscarriage, each of whom she buries near her home—a painful testament to her enduring grief. Yet, with the birth of her daughter Lucy, who miraculously survives several near-death experiences, a sense of hope is rekindled. Lucy becomes a symbol of life and renewal: the entire village embraces her as one of their own, and she, in turn, becomes a source of comfort and strength, caring for and entertaining the community's children.

When she grew up, Lucy's life was marked by profound personal losses, including the death of her mother, Iddū. She finds solace in Marco, a man deeply in love with her, and she experiences her first intimate connection with him. Their love is tested when the brutality of war forces the village to flee, embarking on a harrowing journey to Khartoum. There, they find refuge at Peter's house, Marco's southern friend who became a soldier in the Sudanese army. Peter's backstory again adds another layer to the narrative. Raised in a Muslim family by a kind, adoptive father, Peter's bond with this loving family is shattered after a misunderstood incident involving one of his foster sisters. Although nothing inappropriate occurred, the mere accusation forces Peter to leave the only home he has ever known—a painful consequence of how fragile trust can become in a society shaped by suspicion and trauma.

Through the experiences of Iddū, Lucy, and Peter, the novel explores the themes of survival, love, and the unyielding strength of community, painting a vivid picture of life amidst the struggles of displacement and conflict.

Ultimately, in both Bashīr's testimonial memoir and Qāytānū's fictionalized epic, we see how personal history and cultural identity become essential tools for constructing narratives of resistance, survival, and collective memory. Their narratives remind us that storytelling, in its most committed form, is a political and deeply human act.

5. Women's struggles in patriarchal and tradition-bound Ssocieties

A key observation by Tembo (2018) on *Tears of the Desert* highlights that Bašīr wrote it to document her personal experience and to expose the use of wartime rape as a tool of ethnic cleansing carried out by proxy forces under the Khartoum-led government. The Janjaweed Arab militia used violence against women as a means to attack the integrity of an entire nation. In times of civil war, women often face precarious conditions, as their bodies become battlegrounds for the assertion of ethnic and national dominance—the 'trooping of colors and ethnicities.'

It is possible to discern from reading *Tears of the Desert* that in Sudanese society, women's bodies are socially constructed as vessels of honor and potential disgrace. Subjected to practices such as genital cutting and facial scarification with knives, and burdened with tasks like wood gathering to demonstrate strength and marital value, women are disciplined into conforming to gendered expectations that serve patriarchal and communal ideologies. These realities speak directly to Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, which elucidates how overlapping structures of oppression, gender, race, ethnicity, and coloniality—interact to render certain forms of suffering invisible within dominant narratives (Crenshaw 1991).

Yet the broader field of trauma studies, shaped largely by epistemologies of the Global North, often fails to account for these intersecting layers of violence and silencing. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), argues that trauma entails a crisis of representation—a wound that is not only experienced but also missed, deferred, or unclaimed. Bašīr's act of writing, therefore, can be read as an attempt to reclaim what has been historically disavowed: the right of women in Sudan to narrate trauma in their own terms.

It is a call to rethink—and move beyond—the dominant Eurocentric, monocultural perspectives on trauma, urging a more cross-cultural and ethically grounded understanding. Western models of trauma, in fact, have primarily centered on the Holocaust and Freudian psychoanalysis, with its

emphasis on repression, latency, and the belated return of the traumatic event (Craps 2013). This reading challenges the assumptions of canonical trauma studies, which have historically been shaped by Euro-American contexts and grounded in psychoanalytic models that prioritize individual psychic rupture, belatedness, and the unspeakability of trauma—as exemplified in foundational works by Cathy Caruth (1996), Dominick LaCapra (2001), and Dori Laub (1992).

In contrast, trauma writing from Arab countries affected by civil war and authoritarian violence—such as the works of Bašīr and Qāytānū—foregrounds collective suffering, structural violence, and the intersection of trauma with race, gender, and neocolonial histories. These narratives do not merely replicate canonical trauma aesthetics but redefine the terms of witnessing and survivability through culturally specific modes of expression, oral traditions, and political urgency. In doing so, they resist the presumed universality of western trauma theory and demand a broader, more inclusive framework for understanding trauma and its literary representations.

Building on this perspective, Bašīr and Qāytānū expose a distinct dimension of trauma as experienced in Arab countries grappling with authoritarianism and civil war. They narrate trauma as something rooted in ordinary, daily life during peacetime and the forms of exacerbation in periods of conflict. The two authors developed their narration and storytelling on normalized traumatic violence recurring in the everyday lives of entire populations or marginalized communities subjected to discrimination and persecution based on their origin, race, gender, religion, or social background. Hence, it creates multilayered forms of traumatic violence. In the same perception, Annemarie Pabel (2023) affirmed that traumatic dislocation and disintegration, along with their behavioral and ideological reproduction, occur systemically rather than from a single, abrupt event.

We must recognize that the trauma experienced by colonized populations—particularly women—cannot be disentangled from the intersecting systems of oppression that have historically shaped their lives. During the period of British-Egyptian colonization, Sudan was subjected to an intensification of patriarchal ideologies and systemic violence against women, creating an additional layer of trauma that remained largely unaddressed in foundational trauma theory. In *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1981), Bell Hooks explores how the legacy of colonialism and slavery produced a distinct form of racialized and gendered trauma—one that continues to haunt black women's bodies and psyches through internalized inferiority, generational pain, and social marginalization.

In Sudan, colonial authorities systematically co-opted and empowered tribal and religious male leaders as intermediaries, sidelining women from political, economic, and social roles they had historically occupied. The colonial legal apparatus further entrenched this marginalization by instituting dual legal systems—combining colonial and customary law—that largely excluded women

from legal protections, especially in cases of sexual and domestic violence. In many instances, sexual violence by colonial soldiers and officials was widespread, normalized, and left unpunished, embedding gender-based violence into the machinery of colonial control (Hale 1996). These conditions were upheld and inherited by postcolonial regimes, contributing to a society where women's trauma is not merely individual or psychological, but deeply historically embedded and structurally perpetuated.

Bell Hooks, in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Hooks 1984) critiques both white feminist and black liberation movements for their failure to address the unique trauma of black women, whose suffering emerges from a compounded history of colonial violence, systemic racism, and patriarchal domination. Her analysis resonates powerfully with the experiences of Sudanese women, as depicted in *Tears of the Desert* and Qāytānū's short stories, where women experience gender-based violence in tandem with the legacies of colonial rule, ethnic conflict, and entrenched male dominance. These literary narratives demonstrate how women's trauma is layered, collective, and politically constructed—reflecting Hooks' insistence that liberation cannot be achieved without addressing the intersectional nature of oppression.

In the Sudanese context, this intersectionality includes the enduring impact of colonial policies that reshaped gender roles, diminished women's social agency, and accentuated patriarchal norms under the guise of 'civilization.' Among the most pervasive forms of such systemic trauma is the gendered violence directed at women's bodies, especially through practices justified by cultural or moral norms. Within these patriarchal structures, circumcision plays a central role, functioning as a mechanism of control over women's sexuality and autonomy. It is regarded as a means to suppress desire and ensure that girls remain 'pure' until deemed suitable for marriage by their male guardians—grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and fathers. Similarly, Saʿdāwī (1977) argued that Arab women were burdened with the responsibility of upholding their families' reputation, dignity, and honor through the preservation of their bodies—most notably by being subjected to circumcision.

Ḥalīmah Bašīr endured a circumcision that left her with a lifelong sense of betrayal toward her mother and grandmother. Throughout the narration, the author denounces these brutal practices, which include the removal of the clitoris to the cutting of the vaginal lips using contaminated instruments, without anesthesia, and carried out by elderly individuals with no medical experience (Bashir 2008). In a haunting parallel, Sa'dāwī (1977) recounts the scene of her own circumcision-and that of her sister- describing how she was seized in the middle of the night at just six years old, and how her mother—a well-educated woman raised in a French school—was among the perpetrators.

Building on this analysis of gendered trauma and systemic violence in Ḥalīmah Bašīr's memoir, we now turn to another literary representation that, while fictional, echoes similar structures of

suffering and resilience. *Arwāḥ Iddū* offers a powerful counterpart to Bašīr's testimonial narrative. While Bašīr recounts her lived experiences as a survivor of war, gender-based violence, and medical abuse, Qāytānū crafts a multigenerational epic that traces how historical trauma, ancestral curses, and patriarchal norms haunt the lives of women across time and space. Through the story of Iddū—a woman condemned to bear only stillborn children—Qāytānū explores not only the deeply rooted superstitions and spiritual beliefs of Sudanese society, but also broader questions of fragile masculinity, women's basic rights, and structural oppression.

Qāytānū's writing is deeply political and socially engaged. Her work foregrounds the suffering and resilience of marginalized communities—particularly women and displaced individuals. Through literature, she preserves history, amplifies the voices of those silenced by war, and interrogates the complexities of identity and belonging. *Edo's Souls* stands as a testament to her ability to weave intimate personal narratives into broader political and historical contexts, consolidating her place as one of the most significant literary voices of her generation.

Qāytānū's work centers on women's experiences under systemic and normalized manifestations of violence, speaking both about them and on their behalf. She portrayed Tāḥiya**,** Peter's sister who represents a female character who undergoes circumcision after suspicions arise about an inappropriate relationship with her adoptive brother. She marries the first man willing to overlook her perceived 'shame,' only to suffer relentless abuse. Her husband belittles and assaults her, eventually raping her and using a knife to force penetration due to her physical scarring. Throughout their marriage, she endures continuous humiliation and violence. Drawing on Sa'dāwī (1977) and Al-Saʿīd (2014), women are seen as the guardians of their families' honor and are expected to strictly adhere to all the rules imposed by their families to avoid bringing any shame or disgrace upon them or their siblings. They bear the responsibility of preserving the reputation of everyone around them, keeping it 'intact.'

In Sudanese culture, women are often portrayed through two contrasting lenses, a dichotomy vividly reflected in novels by Sudanese authors who draw on personal experiences within their families and communities. On one hand, women are expected to conform to traditional norms—remaining at home, obeying male authority, and upholding familial honor. Any deviation from these expectations, such as leaving the house without the permission of a male guardian (father, grandfather, brother, or even brother-in-law), can be perceived as a threat to the integrity of the family or even the wider community. Acts as personal as falling in love, forming romantic relationships, or protesting about patriarchal constraints are frequently interpreted as dishonorable transgressions.

On the other hand, the female body becomes a symbolic battlefield through which power and authority are contested. In times of social tension or conflict, control over women's bodies is used to assert dominance, both within families and across communities. The maternal and feminine body is thus inscribed with the weight of collective struggle, transformed into a site for reinforcing masculine power. These cultural and literary polemics underscore how women's bodies are instrumentalized—not only to preserve honor but also to validate and reaffirm male authority.

This dynamic is further explored in Ḥalīmah Bašīr's powerful memoir, where she exposes a social system in which women are often reduced to mere numbers—a tally of conquests to bolster a man's status. Women are portrayed as possessions, ornamental objects or female laborers, whose value lies in their ability to enhance male authority. The more women a man possesses, the greater his prestige among the men of the village. Women, in turn, shoulder the majority of the responsibilities, working both inside and outside the home, while men often remain idle. Bašīr (2008) underscores the absurdity of this hierarchy, noting that a man with only one wife might be mocked as a man with 'only one eye.' Through sharp critique, she dismantles the patriarchal logic that objectifies women and girls.

In addition, superstitions, black omens, and firm beliefs in the continued presence of ancestral and supernatural spirits—believed to guide, protect, or punish the living—are deeply rooted in Sudanese society. People believe that plants, animals, and wishes can affect their destiny or the fate of their beloved ones leading to their perishing and death. Most African communities believed that the environment (nature) was the abode of the spirits, the living dead and ancestors (Gumo *et al.* 2021).

In *Edo's Souls*, Lucy devoted herself to protecting not only her own children but also those of Peter and Theresa. She never left their side, driven by the fear that wandering spirits—homeless and restless—were searching for bodies to inhabit. These spirits, she feared, could push out the fragile souls of babies: "Don't you see the wicked people around you? It's all their mother's fault" (Gaitano 2023: 112).[8]

Lucy was also against the idea of sending children away to school out of fear that they may be haunted by spirits. Furthermore, Marco, Lucy's husband, suggests that he perceives his marriage not just to Lucy as an individual but to a collective of souls filled with power, life, love, desire, forgiveness, and passion:

> Lucy was not just Lucy on her own, she was a soul inhabited by a tribe of other souls: her mother, her dead siblings...Lucy was every tree she had ever climbed, every blade of grass that had ever bent under her bare feet; she was the thunder, rain and wind, the threads of sunshine when the

[8] All quotes are from Gaitano (2023), the English-language translation of Qāytānū (2018).

> clouds cleared; she was the fragrance of the soil and the fields while they waved, laden with grain. (Gaitano 2023: 109)

Lucy received her comfort from seeing the spirit of her mother Iddū appearing all over the house. This comforting spirit watched over the children and fostered peace and love among married couples, as the people of her village had always believed:

> What made things worse…was that her mother's spirit had disappeared. Lucy explained to him that the spirits that had ascended in peace could not stay in the same place as spirits violently removed from the realm of the living (Gaitano 2023, 208).

Superstition plays a significant role in Sudanese society, permeating the collective imagination through beliefs about good and bad fortune often linked to subtle physical traits. One's destiny could and might be conditioned by hair color. In Ḥalīmah Bašīr's case, a single white eyelash shaped the trajectory of her life: "In Zaghawa tradition a white eyelash signifies good fortune" (Bašīr 2008: 10). The family was fairly convinced that the livestock business of Halima's father started to flourish this year and he managed to buy an old Land Rover due to the good luck spread in the air by the birth of the blessed baby girl whose eye holds a white fortunate eyelash. Moreover, Zaghawa women traditionally cover their heads not out of religious conviction, but rather from a cultural fear of the evil eye and its potential harm.

These cultural beliefs about fate and protection naturally extend to perceptions of women and their roles in society. Women's behavior, attitudes, appearance, and the spaces they occupy are often shaped by deeply rooted convictions and beliefs ingrained in the collective consciousness. According to Ḥalīmah Bašīr, the beautiful black woman from the Zaghawa, women are frequently linked to malicious actions or supernatural, demonic forces—associations that are believed to arise from real or imagined misdeeds.

Building on the same idea, Naṣr (2018) argues that there is a so-called 'positive' perspective on women rooted in patriarchal culture—one that views women primarily through the lens of reproduction and dependence on men, portraying them as deserving of guardianship, affection, and guidance. Alongside this, he describes a far more destructive view prevalent in Sudanese societies: one shaped by an obsessive, exclusionary mindset that sees women as inherently bad or impure. This perception has led to their punishment through oppression, flogging, torture, and even acts of murder and rape—as witnessed in bleeding Darfur.

According to Nasr (2018), this violence is deeply stratified: educated, middle-class women are sharply criticized if they voice ideas that challenge the dominant ideological or religious system and

may even be threatened with severe flogging. Meanwhile, marginalized women—from regions like Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, or South Sudan before secession, or those belonging to ethnic or racial minorities—are reduced to the status of servants, subjected to imprisonment, flogging, or rape with impunity, in what is perversely framed as 'honor.' Thus, Nasr emphasizes that the oppression of women in Sudan is not monolithic but rather varies according to race, region, tribe, and social status.

This analysis has explored how the lived and literary experiences of Bašīr and Qāytānū reveal a distinct kind of trauma—uniquely shaped by the intersection of gender, colonial legacies, and social control. It is a deeply embedded, structural violence that women in Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq and Sudan endure across generations. By presenting these experiences, the analysis challenges dominant frameworks and insists on recognizing trauma in its culturally specific, gendered, and historically layered forms.

6. Women's voices, wounded bodies: trauma, identity, and literary resistance

The author of *Tears of the Desert* personally endured the devastating conflict between the Zaghawa tribe and the Janjaweed Arab militias, who attacked her village and subjected forty-two schoolgirls and their teachers to brutal assaults. As the first formally trained doctor in her village, Ḥalīmah Bašīr bore witness to the harrowing experiences of each girl, deeply engaging with their trauma. According to Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and Jean Laplanche (1973), we revisit the discussion of traumatic experiences by emphasizing the definition of trauma:

> An event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization. In economic terms, the trauma is characterized by an influx of excitations that is excessive by the standard of the subject's tolerance and capacity to master such excitations and work them out psychically. (La Planche and Pontalis 1973)[9]

The term 'trauma,' originally rooted in medical discourse, was adopted by psychoanalysts such as Freud (1920) and Laplanche (1970), who translated its threefold meaning—violent shock, laceration, and consequences for the entire organism—into the realm of the psyche. This tripartite definition provides

[9] Drs. Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and Jean Laplanche (1973) from the "Association Psychanalytique de France," successfully compiled a dictionary of Freud's concepts. It was a major project sponsored by the Association Psychanalytique de France, aimed at systematizing and clarifying the key terms in Freudian psychoanalysis for French readers and psychoanalytic training.

a powerful interpretive framework for *Tears of the Desert*, particularly in the final chapters where the aftershocks of violence unfold in full force.

After enduring brutal gang rape and torture at the hands of Sudanese military forces—a scene that marks the psychic and physical core of Bašīr's trauma—the protagonist is thrust into a cycle of displacement, loss, and belated psychological collapse. Upon returning to her village, she is met not with safety, but with the charred remains of her community and the collective grief of the Zaghawa people, whose uprising against the Arab regime reflects both ethnic resistance and deep spiritual rupture. Ḥalīmah's own protest— her refusal to remain silent about the rape of schoolgirls —aligns her with that resistance but also deepens her personal vulnerability.

Her return to the ancestral home becomes a symbolic act of seeking shelter not just from war, but from the disintegration of meaning itself. Similarly, Lucy, the empowered protagonist of *Arwāḥ Iddū*, travels with her children and spouse to her native village in South Sudan. This journey is a return to her roots: an effort to reconnect with her origins, introduce her children to their ancestral land, and visit her grandmother's grave. Through this pilgrimage, Lucy seeks peace, spiritual grounding, and the protective presence of close family members—longed for during their years of displacement in Khartoum.

In both narratives, such acts of return—physical, emotional, and symbolic—can be read as responses to trauma's persistent residues. Psychoanalytically, this sequence reflects what Laplanche and Pontalis (1967) describe as the third layer of trauma—*les séquelles*—the lingering consequences that reverberate throughout the psyche and body long after the initial blow (Bokanowski 2002). This enduring psychic residue is vividly captured when Bašīr reflects: **"**The void of a deep depression swallowed me, where the loneliness and darkness seized hold of my soul." (Bashir 2008: 273).

Here, trauma is no longer a past event—it is a living force lodged in her body, manifesting as a pervasive emotional and somatic collapse. That this internal devastation emerges just before her planned reintegration into society (through the arranged marriage) further underscores the inescapable temporality of trauma: it neither follows linear time nor conforms to social rhythms of healing. Bashīr's experience, therefore, exemplifies how trauma operates simultaneously as shock**,** wound**,** and systemic aftermath—a total assault on both the body and meaning-making faculties.

From this psychological and bodily fragmentation, we move into the realm of narration—a space where trauma not only resides, but writes itself. At this point, the writing of these two novels—filled with scenes of horror, hunger, and anxiety—exemplifies what Maurice Blanchot (1986) called 'the writing of the disaster.' Here, trauma assumes authorship, while the disaster strips agency from the

writer. Writing about disaster is not simply the recounting of a traumatic event, but rather a writing that unfolds within its impact and aftermath.

The disaster inscribes lasting effects on the traumatized subject, generating a compulsion to bear witness—not only to exorcise haunting memories, but to warn the world that what occurred may return. It is, ultimately, a call to remember, to resist forgetting, and to prevent the recurrence of atrocity.

One of the most personal and culturally complex traumas that Ḥalīmah Bašīr recounts—precisely through this need to testify—is the horror of female circumcision, which she refers to as 'the Cutting Time.' For all Zaghawa girls and women, getting circumcised was a moment of pride. They organized a party at home because it marks the passage of Ḥalīmah from girlhood to womanhood. Bašīr expressed her shock using words shaped by trauma and intended to document the disaster in order to prevent it from happening to other young girls.

> With the first slash of the razor blade, a bolt of agony shot through me like nothing I had ever experienced. I let out a blood curdling scream, and as I did so I started kicking and fighting to get free. But all that happened was that the huge woman bore down on me, clamping my legs in her vicelike grip... [...] I felt a gush of warm blood as the taihree[10] took hold of me again, slicing deeper and deeper, hot tears rushing down my face, but the cutting just went on and on and on. (Bashir and Lewis 2008: 66–68)

This moment stands not only as a deeply embodied physical trauma but also as the first rupture in Halīmah's sense of trust and bodily autonomy. The drama Ḥalīmah experienced and witnessed was deeply entrenched in her authentic writing. One of her first traumas that marked her biggest injury was the cutting moment, 'the circumcision.' As we see in a poignant scene, she depicts the *al-ṭahāra* (the traditional practitioner of female circumcision), who forced the girl's legs apart and performed the procedure without hesitation, despite Ḥalīmah's screams and terror.

Her grandma scowled, feeling disappointed as Ḥalīmah had done something wrong for not being able to bear the pain of being cut in 'her fresh flesh' while she feels deeply the pain. Ḥalīmah did not understand the reactions of her grandmother. A figure she has always considered as a reflection for everything that was forced on Ḥalīmah, everything Ḥalīmah hated, and rebelled against. The Grandmother is a representation of every rejection, every 'No,' a reflection of the senseless beliefs and traditions that made Halima resent her very existence as a girl. A sense of betrayal and abandonment

has prevailed in Ḥalīmah's mind and soul. The scene of the cutting, screaming and fight to free herself depicts Ḥalīmah as a ferocious injured animal.

Ḥalīmah's traumatic experience of circumcision, rape, and shaming illustrates how trauma in Sudan is deeply entangled with colonial legacies, gendered violence, and cultural traditions that perpetuate systemic oppression. Drawing from Annemarie Pabel's Women Writing Trauma in the Global South (2023), trauma here transcends a purely individual psychic wound and becomes a collective, embodied testimony that exposes the violence embedded within patriarchal and postcolonial social structures. The brutal act of circumcision, inflicted without anesthesia by elderly women, and sanctioned by her own grandmother, marks a violent betrayal that carves pain directly into her body under the guise of cultural duty. This foundational trauma is later compounded by the prolonged, state-sponsored gang rape she endures alone—an act of violence that leaves her body desecrated and her soul lacerated by humiliation and grief.

According to Joshua Pederson (2014), literary narrative holds a privileged capacity to communicate the deepest and most resistant psychic wounds—a power that ordinary language often lacks. Building on Geoffrey Hartman's (1996) notion that trauma may only be reclaimed through literature, Pederson argues that literary narrative can uniquely deliver realities that are otherwise unspeakable.

In Ḥalīmah Bašīr's memoir, this power is vividly realized: her depiction of female circumcision and the brutal rape incidents becomes immersive and affective through precise storytelling. Her detailed narration bridges the gap between memory and the reader's imagination, allowing those traumatic events to unfold like a cinematic sequence, immersing readers in the visceral reality of pain, betrayal, and resilience.

Futhermore, according to Morrissey (2021) mass cultural trauma often gives rise to literary works that share distinct stylistic features—traits we now often associate with postmodernism. These include nonlinear storytelling, repetition, intertextuality, and a striving for specialized (even magical) language—narrative techniques that mimic the struggles of the traumatized to express their trauma.

This theoretical framework of trauma as both a disruptive psychological experience and a shaping force in narrative form is deeply embodied in the writings of Ḥalīmah Bašīr. Her autobiography does not merely recount events; it performs trauma through its structure, voice, and repetition. The devastating scenes Bašīr narrates—most notably the Arab Janjaweed militia's brutal assault on young girls in a Darfuri school, where Sudanese troops were on guard while eight-year-old girls were raped in addition to the prolonged rape and torture she endured for several days—are rendered through fragmented, repetitive, and emotionally charged language.

> I feel a searing agony as the knife man thrusts himself inside me, ripping me apart as he does so. 'My God, she's tight!' the knife man cries. 'Real tight! They make these Zaghawa ones tighter than the others[...]. Well, loosen her up for the rest of us,' the kneeling one calls over his shoulder. He turns back to face me. 'So, now you know what rape is, you black dog. Now you know. (Bashir 2008: 267)

After being gang-raped for three days, they finally let her go. Throughout the ordeal, she was forced to look her attackers in the eyes, their gaze confirming her defeat and loss. One assault followed another without pause. She was left in a completely dark room infested with rats, her body covered in cuts and bruises, wracked with pain. In the end, they released her—not to save her, but so she could live and bear the burden of that brutal memory every single second of her life. The perpetrators were suspected members of the National Intelligence and Security Service.

The use of repetition in *'Tears of the Desert'* mirrors the psychological entrapment of trauma, where survivors relive their suffering in an obsessive, cyclical manner. The phrase **"**they're going to kill you; they're going to kill you; they're going to kill you" (Bashir 2008: 262) reflects the intrusive thoughts that dominate the mind under extreme distress. Similarly, the desperate plea "My God, release me. My God, release me. My God, release me" (Bashir 2008: 266) conveys a psychological fracture, where language itself becomes a means of processing unbearable pain. The perpetrators' mocking statement—"Now you can go and tell the world about rape"—reinforces their power over the victim, turning survival into a continued punishment rather than an escape.

In addition, a key insight from Geoffrey Hartman (1996) and Kurtz (2023) concerns how traumatic repetition compels victims to retell their stories in an involuntary, cyclical manner. Hartman, while writing about Holocaust testimony, emphasized the tension between the need to speak and the inability to fully articulate trauma. Building on this, Kurtz demonstrates how this paradox becomes embedded in the very structure of trauma narratives, where repetition and temporal disjunction function not only as symptoms of trauma but also as defining literary techniques. This pattern is evident in Bashīr's repeated phrases like "they're going to kill you" (Bashir 2008: 262), which echo the compulsive return to traumatic moments. Trauma narratives often blur the boundaries between past and present, rendering suffering continuous and inescapable. The line "until one animal assault merged into the next" (Bashir 2008: 268) captures how trauma collapses the distinction between separate acts of violence, trapping the victim in an unending nightmare. Even after her release, the protagonist remains psychologically imprisoned by her memories, forced to relive the pain moment by moment. In this way, repetition in Bašīr's text does not merely recount trauma—it re-enacts it, drawing the reader into the suffocating weight of the survivor's reality: "I embraced my father, burying

my head in his shoulder. He was so full of love for me: he was trying to drag me back from death to life" (Bashir 2008: 274; on this point see also Kurtz 2018 and Alavi and Bulut 2021).

This aligns with the understanding of the impact of traumatic events on individuals which is shaped by a range of factors that influence how the experience is phenomenologically encoded and later recalled. In some cases, such events may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition characterized by three core symptom clusters: re-experiencing (including intrusive memories, nightmares, or flashbacks), avoidance (efforts to evade thoughts, emotions, memories, environments, or people associated with the trauma), and hyperarousal (manifesting as sleep disturbances, irritability, or sudden outbursts of anger (Al Amar 2018: 137).

Consequently, Ḥalīmah Bašīr, in collaboration with Damien Lewis, sought to narrate the most troubling episodes of her past in an attempt to find meaning in her pain and to give vent to her anger. Writing and narrating trauma holds a restorative power, serving both as a form of emotional release and as an act of reclaiming agency

According to Joshua Pederson (2014), creative language can play a meaningful role in the healing process by reshaping painful memories through narrative structure and metaphor. Expressing personal trauma is a common therapeutic approach, whether through individual conversations, group discussions, or writing. In the same context, Morrissey (2021) pointed out that, for psychological patients and individuals struggling with post traumatic disorders, writing about trauma can be a healing process while also fostering empathy and awareness in readers.

> Building on this idea, the notion that memory is the space where experience and imagination converge — and that imagination is, as some suggest, fermented memory — allows us to further understand how narrative becomes a vessel for healing and meaning-making. (Morrissey 2021: 8)

6. The intersection of trauma and feminist resistance in Sudanese fiction

In a different light, Qāytānū's novel can be read as an investigation into the hidden costs women pay for injustices they never committed. Qāytānū presents a powerful portrait of empowered Sudanese women who resist patriarchal oppression and redefine their roles within their communities. The novel exposes both the roots and manifestations of institutionalized gender discrimination. At the center of this resistance stands the protagonist, Iddū, who encourages her female friends to rebel against the men who belittle and abuse them.

Through Iddū, Qāytānū portrays a woman who is both nurturing and revolutionary. She raises her daughter, Lucy, to be generous and community-oriented, instilling in her the belief that she is a

miracle—created by God and protected by both divine will and maternal affection. Lucy becomes a symbol of hope and continuity, helping to raise the village's children and embodying a new generation of conscious women. Yet, as Bell Hooks reminds us, "to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation" (Hooks 1982: 6). This observation underscores the importance of acknowledging the suffering beneath women's apparent strength—a tension that Qāytānū delicately explores through Iddū's character.

Iddū, in fact, is a rebellious woman who had faced in her life the loss of all her children, one after another, at the age of one year. Her unfenced dirt yard was full of small graves. In an attempt to find an answer for her misery and agony, Iddū embraced the new religion preached by the white evangelists who came to her village to guide people about the Lord and his salvation. She wholeheartedly embraced their new teachings and never missed a prayer. Whether her faith truly helped remains unknown, but it brought her a sense of peace, soothing her sadness and anger (Qualey 2024). This inner calm empowered her to transform her pain into a mission to fight for women suffering from injustice.

She always held stunningly rebellious and outlandish ideas, openly defying the rituals and traditions that inflicted suffering on women. Iddū rejected many of the practices imposed by men, particularly the custom of offering a murderer's sister as compensation to the victim's family—a practice that allowed them to use her as they pleased. In most cases, the girl would be treated like a servant, forced to farm, cook, fetch water, and bear multiple children as punishment for a crime she did not commit. One of Iddū's neighbors, a young girl given in this way, suffered so intensely that she ended her life by hanging herself from the rafters, while her brother, the actual killer, continued living freely. Iddū believed that as long as men were never personally held accountable, they would continue to kill without hesitation.

This practice, known as 'girl-child blood compensation' (*diyyat al-qatl wa-l-taʿwīḍ bi-l-fatayāt*) is a deeply rooted custom in some Sudanese communities. As Wilson (2014) notes, in many cases, the only form of justice offered to grieving families is compensation—often in the form of cattle or, more disturbingly, the offering of a young girl as a substitute. Such settlements rarely lead to healing; instead, they perpetuate cycles of trauma and gender-based injustice.

Iddū preached her ideas and 'she was considered touched in her head.' Her sadness for her personal loss and for the torment of other women shaped her mind. However, the tribal chiefs eventually agreed with her, and reconciliation required the killer's family to provide livestock as restitution. Iddū was successful in altering the traditional laws governing the consequences for murders so that young girls might live in peace and no longer be the target of retaliation.

Istīlā Qāytānū depicted a figure of a powerful woman in confrontation with the whole society spreading progressive thinking and audacious actions in order to empower women to claim their rights and to bring to an end the masculine abuse and the marital violence. In a particularly dramatic fictional episode, Qāytānū constructs a moment of female revenge and empowerment. Marta, Iddū's very special friend, was subject to societal condemnation because she did not have any children from her husband, a man a full meter shorter than her, a vile drunkard who beat her and verbally abused her for being 'infertile.' Iddū stopped by Marta's house after one of the beating scenes, heard by many of the village inhabitants, who did not even care to check on Marta:

> You just can't get enough, can you? Don't you know how powerful you are? You're just laying like a rhino caught in some trap, rolling around in the mud. Look at yourself: how can you let that rat play around with you like this? Breaking your bones and giving you new bruises every day? Beat him" (Gaitano 2023: 16)

Marta was terrified of what people might say about her. But the strong and fearless Iddū told her "People are going to talk anyway, why not change what they're talking about and make it more thrilling? More shocking?" (Gaitano 2023: 16-17). That very night, Marta carried out her greatest act of revenge. When her husband began complaining about the cattle he had lost paying her dowry, she snapped. Rising to her feet, legs firmly planted, she gripped a cane and struck him—again and again—driven by rage, humiliation, and years of pent-up frustration. As he wailed in pain, she dragged him outside into the dirt yard, refusing to let the village men rescue him from her hands: *"*Come any closer and you're dead. Where were you when he was beating me every night?*"* (Gaitano 2023: 18).

Another prominent female voice in the novel is Jalāʾ, a lawyer committed to women's causes and household rights. She advocates for the recognition and respect of women within marriage and domestic life. Her love story with Hassan—an activist with a progressive mindset—adds a layer of emotional and political harmony to the narrative. Hassan views Jalāʾ not only as a partner but as his safe harbor, political adviser, and personal idol. Through this relationship, Qāytānū proposes a new model of Sudanese masculinity—one that respects, admires, and uplifts women rather than dominating them. Jalāʾ's agency within both her professional and intimate life marks a significant deviation from traditional gender norms and supports the novel's broader feminist vision.

Though fictional, these female protagonists represent a broader call to action: Qāytānū and Bašīr use them to challenge intersectional injustices and to imagine a world where Sudanese women are free, respected, and central to societal change. Echoing Bell Hooks' critique of how society often praises women's resilience while ignoring their pain, *Arwāḥ Iddū* insists not just on visibility for its female characters but on their full humanity—their right to vulnerability, dignity, and change.

The empowering narratives emphasize the power of trauma writing as a catalyst for change. Actually, depicting trauma through literature has the power to reshape societal norms and traditions and to influence legislation in favor of the oppressed by modifying cultural narratives and promoting empathy:

> By performing a function similar to psychoanalysis, texts allow the remembering, the telling, and the convergence of unassimilated memories in a way that encourages forms of textual working through or healing. Moreover, such texts encourage a process of public sharing and exposure and can indeed constitute a precious social and ethical service. (Morrissey 2021: 8)

These literary portrayals echo real-life efforts to address systemic gender violence in Sudan. Along with the work of local activists and organizations in Sudan to criminalize female genital mutilation, this novel contributed to the pressure against female genital mutilation. Sudan only criminalized FGM in 2020, making it punishable by three years in prison. However, due to ingrained traditions, the practice still persists. Also, until 2015 women were caught between rape and adultery because rape was defined as *zinā* (adultery or fornication) without consent. The Sudanese government reformed its criminal code to redefine rape separately from adultery, which was a step toward better legal protections for victims. However, there was widespread impunity for sexual violence.[11]

7. Conclusions

The two novels *Edo's Souls* and *Tears of the Desert* are attempts to preserve a memory threatened by oblivion, placing their authors in positions of ethical commitment and narrative responsibility. Both writers employ strategies rooted in empathy, shock, and symbolic resistance to awaken readers' consciences and inspire humanitarian reform. The tragedy of ethnic cleansing and the psychic rupture of exile from both homeland and loved ones haunt the pages of both narratives. These works denounce the violence of fanaticism—religious, ethnic, and political—that has been weaponized into a tool of genocide and systemic erasure.

At once testimonial and fictional, these are two works of documentary literature that interrogate foundational ideologies and address contemporary issues such as political tyranny, religious extremism, and, most urgently, the systemic violations of women's rights. In particular, they

11 For further information see Tønnessen, Liv, and Samia al-Nagar. Women and Girls Caught between Rape and Adultery in Sudan: Criminal Law Reform, 2005–2015 (in Arabic). Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2016. CMI Report R 2015:10

foreground women's rights to bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive health, and the right to participate fully in society—politically, professionally, and personally.

Crucially, these narratives center women's bodies as sites of historical violence and political resistance, they construct a model of gendered trauma literature rooted in patrarichal and tradition-bound structures of Arab societies. In the works of Bašīr and Qāytānū, trauma is never isolated—it is racialized, gendered, inherited, and intimately tied to displacement, silence, and struggle.

Through the textual depictions of both authors, the narratives construct memorial structures that embody prolonged, repetitive exposure to violence and oppression. The trauma is not a single rupture but a condition of ongoing existence—persistent, cyclical, and socially reinforced.

From these insights emerge two essential conclusions. First, the author assumes the role of social chronicler, documenting the conditions of her era through lived testimony and a narrative witness account. Second, both novels reveal how patriarchal societies sanctify the female body only to control it—enforcing restrictive norms that exclude women from full public participation. In contrast, men—empowered by political authority—use this dynamic to subjugate and exploit women, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy of power.

Yet by the end of both narratives, the female protagonists have undergone radical transformation. No longer passive subjects of history, they emerge as active agents of change. They rebel against coercion, expose injustice, and most importantly, leave behind the spaces of pain in pursuit of autonomy and dignity. As Bell Hooks reminds us, "To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality" (Hooks 2000: 110). This vision is precisely what *Edo's Souls* and *Tears of the Desert* embody: women who transform personal pain into collective resistance, and resistance into radical, life-affirming hope.

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