

Exploring the Depths of Human Resilience: War, Displacement, and Identity in Samar Yazbek's *Planet of Clay*

Padmapriya P^{1*} and Dr. M. Alagesan²

^{1*}Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur - 603203, Chengalpattu Dt., Tamil Nadu, India, pp1672@srmist.edu.in

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3158-307X

²Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages, Faculty of Engineering and Technology, SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Kattankulathur - 603203, Chengalpattu Dt., Tamil Nadu, India, alagesam@srmist.edu.in

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1620-5487

How to cite this article: Padmapriya P, M. Alagesan (2024) Exploring the Depths of Human Resilience: War, Displacement, and Identity in Samar Yazbek's *Planet of Clay*. *Library Progress International*, 44(3), 7671-7676.

Abstract

Displacement is one of the significant geographical elements in human history. People displace themselves mainly for two reasons. Firstly, as a choice of empowerment, and secondly, as no choice but of compulsion. This research paper focuses on the second reason behind displacement in the context of war on the compulsive displacement of individuals or groups. To understand compulsive displacement, the researchers examine the novel *Planet of Clay* by Samar Yazbek through the lens of Judith Herman's Trauma theory and Michael Ungar's Ecological Resilience Theory. By tracing the protagonist, Rima's journey in *Planet of Clay*, this research further explores her traumatic experiences and her resilience to handle the adversities during the war. Thus, this research paper highlights the extreme need for an ongoing discussion on war, displacement, and identity. By shedding light on the psychological impacts of war and the potential for resilience at both environmental and personal levels, this research discusses the effects of war on individual and collective identities and the transformative power of resilience.

Keywords: Syrian war, Traumatic experience, Compulsive Displacement, Resilience and Identity

Introduction

War and displacement are intricately linked and multifaceted phenomena that have been widespread throughout human history. War is a broad concept that refers to armed hostility between distinct nations or factions within a nation. It entails the utilization of coercion, aggression, and structured armed operations to attain political, territorial, or ideological goals. Wars can arise from many factors, such as territorial conflicts, limited resources, political ideologies, ethnic or religious tensions, and power rivalries between governments or groups. Certain conflicts are motivated by a thirst for authority and control, while others may be waged to protect oneself or to rectify perceived wrongdoings. Overall, "Wars and natural disasters are currently some of the main factors threatening human life" (Boostani et al.). The consequences of war not only affect the humans but also the environment. This research paper focuses on war disasters in the context of displacement, resilience, and identity.

Displacement, in the context of war, denotes the compelled relocation of individuals from their residences or communities as a result of conflict, violence, or persecution. According to the International Organisation for Migration, displacement "comprises all movements of people, either across international borders or within their own states, that are caused by factors of coercion, conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, natural or man-made disasters, and development projects." Displaced individuals are commonly known as refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs). Individuals may undergo displacement to flee from violence, evade conscription, or find refuge in a different geographical area or nation. Additional factors contributing to displacement can encompass natural calamities, violations of human rights, and initiatives related to urbanization

or infrastructure development. There exist two primary categories of displacement. Internal displacement refers to the situation where individuals are compelled to vacate their residences. However, they stay inside the territorial boundaries of their nation. They are commonly referred to as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Refugees are people who have left their native country because they have a strong belief that they will be harmed, face war, or experience violence. They seek asylum in a foreign nation and are safeguarded by international laws and conventions.

For instance, the Syrian conflict, initiated in March 2011 as a sequence of nonviolent protest against President Bashar al-Assad's administration, swiftly escalated into a comprehensive civil war involving multiple domestic factions and international involvements. The protracted conflict has resulted in a catastrophic death toll, widespread devastation, and an unparalleled humanitarian crisis in the 21st century. Millions of Syrians have been compelled to evacuate their residences, both domestically and as asylum seekers in foreign countries. According to the report of UNHCR, "More than 13.4 million Syrians remain displaced inside the country, while over 6.8 million are refugees registered with UNHCR in neighbouring countries." The battle gets increasingly complex as it involves the active involvement of other regional and global powers, including Iran, Russia, Turkey, and a coalition of Western nations. Each of these entities influences distinct factions within Syria, contributing to the intricacy of the issue. The participation of other nations has not only prolonged the duration of the fight but also underscored the significance of the Syrian war as a focal point of geopolitical tensions and its impact on global security, migration, and international relations. The ongoing violence in Syria presents substantial obstacles for the international community in addressing warfare, displacement, and the quest for peace in a highly divided society.

Samar Yazbek is a notable writer in Syrian literature and activism, garnering acclaim for her courageous resistance against the Assad dictatorship. She possesses a wide range of literary works, including novels, essays, and critical pieces that delve into the complex dynamics of Syrian society. Her writings explore the subjects of oppression, revolt, and the unwavering resilience of the human spirit during the destruction caused by war. Yazbek's works possess an unmistakable and emotional power, stemming from her firsthand encounters with persecution and forced displacement due to her vocal opposition to government atrocities. *Planet of Clay* showcases the author's storytelling prowess by offering a detailed examination of the significant repercussions of the Syrian crisis on individuals and society. This study deeply contemplates the intricacies of the human experience in times of turmoil by thoroughly analyzing trauma and resilience. Yazbek's novels give a stimulating viewpoint that challenges established conventions and provides a glimpse of optimism and resistance, emphasizing the unwavering resolve to achieve freedom and justice. Yazbek's achievements extend beyond the realm of writing. She has been instrumental as an activist in heightening worldwide consciousness regarding the Syrian issue. Her endeavours have established her as a prominent activist in the ongoing worldwide discourse on human rights and dignity.

The Impact of War on Individual Identity

Yazbek's novel *Planet of Clay* explores the dramatic shift of individual identity throughout the Syrian war through the journey of the protagonist, Rima. Rima's narrative, set in a Damascus suburb, portrays the profound examination of the internal turmoil caused by exterior acts of violence while highlighting her inability to communicate or escape from her situation. The character's inability to communicate represents the indescribable atrocities of war. At the same time, her constant aimless movement across the destroyed city signifies a desperate quest for self-identity and purpose in a landscape of destruction. Rima's psychological condition, marked by a combination of vibrant fantasy and severe reality, exemplifies the intricate interaction between trauma and resilience. For instance, she travels throughout the novel. Her travel depicts her quest for liberation from the violence in her country. It is observed in the novel,

That day, when my mother disappeared, I didn't know what was going on. Life seemed to be snapping at our heels. I had started to hear planes roaring overhead, our neighbours were disappearing, and men in normal clothes and military uniforms would burst into people's houses. It was called a security patrol. I saw all this but I didn't understand. (15)

Her withdrawal into a realm of sculpted figurines and imaginative narratives serves as a means of evading and dealing with the harshness that envelops her. These interior landscapes demonstrate the capacity of the human mind to establish havens of tranquillity and elegance among scenes of tragedy.

Rima's identity is influenced by conflict in complex ways. It obliterates her previous experiences and

questions her understanding of who she is, but it also creates a fresh persona characterized by resilience and flexibility. Rima's path exemplifies the wider human endeavour to preserve a sense of identity when confronted with immense challenges. Yazbek effectively portrays the profound transformation of one's identity caused by war, as the vestiges of the past and the harsh reality of the present combine to form a resilient yet permanently altered self. The adaptability and resilience can be traced when Rima explains her newly migrated place,

I was missing my paints and my bed, and I tried to understand the new place we were living in. My brother and I were in a room. It wasn't small. It was part of a house where several families lived, in a place called Zamalka, which they said was to the east of Damascus. Even though I hadn't lived too far from here, I'd never heard this name before, it seemed I really didn't know anything about the world ... not even a semblance of it. (58)

Yazbek's narration fearlessly portrays the tangible aspects of war, such as the suffering, terror, and forced relocation endured by non-combatants. However, Rima's unwavering determination and aptitude to discover optimism and elegance even in the most challenging circumstances allows the novel to provide a profound analysis of humanity's ability to adjust and endure. The quiet defiance she displays amidst the war's setting is a potent emblem of the battle against obliteration, encompassing both individual and societal aspects. Yazbek employs Rima's narrative to examine how humans cope with the devastation of their exterior environment and the deterioration of their emotional state. During such a catastrophe, the tenacity of the human spirit emerges as a source of optimism. The novel conveys that our fundamental identity can endure, develop, and finally manifest itself in new ways, even under the most desperate situations.

Displacement and Social Fragmentation

Throughout the novel, Rima's journey explores the distressing outcomes of war-induced displacement, providing a detailed depiction of how it shatters communal bonds and undermines societal identities. Rima's experience serves as a perspective through which the wider breakdown of communities in war-ravaged Syria is observed. The horror of war is observed in the eyes of Rima as,

When we woke up we didn't know how much time had passed. The children and I were .ne. I couldn't move beyond the length of rope tied to the window, because even though the wall facing the yard had been completely destroyed, the window bars were still in place. We didn't know what had happened. The number of men and women around had increased and I glanced at the courtyard. Bits of bodies were scattered all over, and I saw the body of Um Saeed. She had no feet. (74)

As physical venues that once fostered communal life are destroyed, the intangible connections formed through shared experiences, memories, and cultural practices are also severed. Yazbek vividly portrays displacement as more than just a physical move but rather as a deep detachment from the origins that shape an individual's feeling of belonging and identity. Forced migration transforms vibrant neighbourhoods into abandoned areas, eradicating significant symbols of shared history and disrupting the social connections that uphold communal identity. The dispersion of displaced individuals results in a profound sense of confusion and loss as they become strangers in unknown territories, grappling with the challenge of rebuilding a sense of belonging in temporary refugee camps or the seclusion of foreign urban areas.

The fragmentation of social links covers the physical separation from neighbours and family and the breakdown of social roles and relationships that shape an individual's identity within a community. The story effectively portrays the impact of war-induced displacement on traditional social support systems, forcing individuals to cope with their grief and loss in solitude. The fragmentation of community networks adds complexity to the task of reconstructing identity since the social reflections that validate and confirm individual and group identities are destroyed. In addition, Yazbek examines the psychological consequences of this fragmentation, providing a detailed account of her characters' internal conflict as they confront the loss of their social identity. It is reflected as

I wanted to ask him why all this was happening but my tongue wouldn't move, and my eyes were blurry, and I thought of what my brother had said to my mother once, on one of the first days when he came home with torn clothes, and she yelled at him not to go out and protest anymore, and told him the Mukhabarat would kill him at once if they picked him up. My mother was crying ... my brother went out to the protests... I don't understand how a giant plane can come and kill small, weak people in such quantities. (91)

Thus, the narrative resonates with the profound human desire for connection and the anguish caused by its absence, as evidenced by the longing for a home that has been lost and the urge to belong to a place or person. The novel explores the tenacity needed to establish new identities amid misfortune, by which displaced individuals and communities adjust to preserve their cultural legacy and attempt to reconstruct their social structure.

The long-term effects of displacement and social separation are witnessed across generations. The change between generations prompts inquiries regarding the future of social identity within displaced communities and the significance of memory and storytelling in conserving or altering it. Yazbek's narrative deeply reflects how being displaced affects a community's social identity and integrity. Examining the Syrian conflict exposes the profound wounds inflicted upon the societal fabric of displaced people, the difficulties in rebuilding a sense of identity, and the human determination that endures amidst such disintegration.

Resistance and Resilience

Resistance, survival, and perseverance are human experiences that can be observed even during the adversities of the Syrian conflict. Rima's silent existence and her withdrawal into a realm of imagination highlight a type of defiance against the dehumanizing consequences of war. The resistance is characterized by preserving one's personality and identity in the face of external forces that want to destroy them rather than by extravagant actions of defiance. Yazbek depicts survival as more than simply enduring conflict, but rather as the preservation of one's humanity amidst its challenges. The characters in *Planet of Clay* demonstrate survival by fostering communal togetherness, collectively experiencing bereavement, and engaging in little acts of compassion that mend the fragmented fabric of their civilization. These seemingly insignificant actions hold significant power as acts of resistance against the entities aiming to eradicate their culture, history, and shared recollections.

Yazbek's portrayal of resilience goes beyond ordinary survival. The process involves converting sorrow into resilience, whereby the wounds inflicted by conflict are transformed into symbols of fortitude. The novel emphasizes how individuals, although facing persistent challenges, discover creative methods to adjust, uphold their customs, and establish fresh selves. The protagonists' resistance to being constrained by their circumstances demonstrates their resilience and ability to imagine a future that extends beyond the immediate horrors of their current situation. Moreover, Yazbek examines the concept of resilience by focusing on the power of optimism and the unwavering ability of the human spirit to regenerate. Amid pervasive sadness, the protagonists persistently pursue beauty, love, and purpose in a landscape ravaged by war, showcasing hope's unwavering resilience. This hope is not foolish but rather a deliberate decision to defy the nihilism that war attempts to impose. It is a vital component in the fabric of resilience, enabling individuals and societies to progress. It is observed when Rima tries to express her pain in her actions.

WHILE I WRITE these words to you, I feel like I'm in a better state. It isn't the state that I've been in throughout my life, but the state that distances me from what happened that night, and from what is happening now. All I am doing is writing. I only stop at night, when there's no light. Luckily, days in the summer are long. Writing needs a lot of time because, as you know, my letters are drawings. (86)

The novel *Planet of Clay* is a fascinating exploration of human perseverance in extreme adversity. Yazbek skillfully demonstrates that resistance, survival, and resilience are intricately intertwined in the human encounter with conflict, representing the fight for survival and the strong want to regain one's humanity and dignity in the midst of disorder. The novel explores the themes of vulnerability, shared suffering, and hope through Rima's journey and the experiences of those close to her. It serves as a poignant reminder of the human spirit's ability to withstand and rise above the horrors of war.

Conclusion

During a time characterized by war and displacement's persistent and destructive impact, individuals and societies must take immediate action on these challenges and recognize their significant consequences for humanity. Samar Yazbek's novel *Planet of Clay* is a heartbreaking reflection of the complex dynamics between war, displacement, and identity. The narrative of Rima presents readers with a persuasive argument that showcases the unwavering will of human resilience when confronted with unimaginable challenges. The Syrian conflict, a poignant tragedy of contemporary times, highlights the pressing necessity for a worldwide discussion on the long-lasting consequences of warfare and forced migration. Countless Syrians have been forcibly driven from their residences, transforming into refugees in foreign territories or internally displaced within the confines of their own nation. This catastrophe surpasses national boundaries, necessitating persistent attention and concerted action.

The portrayal of Rima is the profound metamorphosis of personal identities during the intense trials of war, where the previous sense of self is shattered, giving rise to a new, resilient character. She is not merely a literary character but rather a persuasive assertion of the resilience of the human spirit when confronted with hopelessness.

Furthermore, the novel reveals the complex consequences of displacement on social cohesion, revealing the deep yearning for connection and a sense of belonging in a world where physical and emotional ties have been violently severed. This fragmentation permeates successive generations, resulting in a lasting impact on uprooted groups' cultural and social structure. However, it also demonstrates the incredible resilience of humanity to adjust, maintain its cultural legacy, and establish new identities in the face of turmoil. The novel presents a compelling case that the human spirit, when confronted with the intense challenges of war and displacement, not only endures but flourishes. Throughout the novel, Rima is a character of enduring strength and optimism that can emerge from the most challenging situations, highlighting the urgent need for an ongoing conversation about war, displacement, and the profound ability of the human spirit to ignite constructive transformation in a world that she is desperately longing for it.

Declaration

Funding

No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Conflicts of interest/Competing interests

Not applicable

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

Both authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation was done by Padmapriya P and analyzed by Dr. M. Alagesan. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Padmapriya P and edited by Dr. M. Alagesan. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript for submission.

Ethics approval

Not applicable

Consent to participate

Not applicable

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Acknowledgments

Not applicable

References

- Boostani, Abtin, et al. (2018). "Optimal Location Selection of Temporary Accommodation Sites in Iran via a Hybrid Fuzzy Multiple-Criteria Decision Making Approach." *Journal of Urban Planning and Development*, vol. 144, no. 4, American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE). Crossref, [https://doi.org/10.1061/\(asce\)up.1943-5444.0000479](https://doi.org/10.1061/(asce)up.1943-5444.0000479).
- Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Translated by J. J. Graham, 1982. Bowker, <https://doi.org/10.1604/9780140444278>.
- Glosarry of Migration. International Organisation of Migration. 2019. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf
- Gannon, B. (2007). Fort Pillow: A Civil War Massacre and Public Memory, and: River Run Red: The Fort Pillow Massacre in the American Civil War (review). *Civil War History*, 53 (3), 304-306.
- Gautam, Bhartendu. (2022). Russo-Ukraine War: Impact on World Politics. 11. 13413-13418. 10.15680/IJIRSET.2022.1111023|.
- Hazer, Livia, and Gustaf Gredebäck. "The Effects of War, Displacement, and Trauma on Child Development." *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1-19, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-023-02438-8>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2024.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. Hachette UK, 2015.
- Little, Branden. (2014). "An Explosion of New Endeavours: Global Humanitarian Responses to Industrialized Warfare in the First World War Era." *First World War Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, Informa UK Limited, pp.

- 1–16. Crossref, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19475020.2014.901184>.
- Mikaberidze, A. (2020). *The Napoleonic Wars: A Global History*. Oxford University Press.
- Nashef, Hania A. M. “Testimonies of WarReportages by Samar Yazbek and Atef Abu Saif.” *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*, Routledge, Nov. 2022, pp. 216–25. Crossref, doi:10.4324/9780429331923-18.
- Sadek, Rima. “Same-sex Relations in Modern Arabic Fiction Between Empowerment and Impossibility.” *Memory, Voice, and Identity*, Routledge, Mar. 2021, pp. 106–17. Crossref, doi:10.4324/9781003100164-12.
- “Syria Emergency | UNHCR.” UNHCR, www.unhcr.org/emergencies/syria-emergency.
- Ungar, Michael. (2011). *The Social Ecology of Resilience*. Springer Science and Business Media.
- Yazbek, Samar. (2021). *Planet of Clay*. Translated by Leri Price, World Editions.