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Cognitive Empathy and Complex Traumatic Events in *The Almond Tree*: A Study of Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Michelle Cohen Corasanti's work of fiction, *The Almond Tree*, is a heartbreaking work of cognitive empathy. This book shed light on the sociocultural trauma that has caused Palestinian cultures to be perceived as a danger to their fundamental collective identities. The depressing and terrifying circumstances faced by Palestinians create a lasting impression on readers' minds. The narrative bridges cultural gaps and fosters empathy by humanizing the characters on both sides of the conflict. The horrific situations facing Palestinians are depicted in the eerie account of events. The narrative of Ahmed Hamid, a Palestinian youngster who chose to venture all the way and against the tides, is the basis for *The Almond Tree*. Through Ahmed Hamid's relationships with Jewish characters, the novel emphasizes the shared humanity that transcends political and religious differences. This work of fiction has been analysed using the ideas of Cultural trauma and Collective identity. The concepts of Suzanne Keen, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Neil J. Smelser, Ron Eyerman, Suzanne Keen, and Piotr Sztompka have been used to analyse this text under debate utilising the theories of Cultural trauma and Collective identity. The researcher has attempted to investigate the tragic work of this fiction and narrative and cognitive empathy through the application of critical analysis technique. **Keywords:** Cognitive Empathy, Cultural Trauma, Collective Identity, Empathy, Narrative Empathy, Trauma.

INTRODUCTION

The present research looks into a tragic piece of cognitive empathy. The sociocultural trauma that has led Palestinian cultures to be seen as a threat to their essential collective identities was clarified in *The Almond Tree*. The horrific and gloomy conditions that Palestinians endure leave a lasting effect on readers. By giving the characters on both sides of the battle a human face, the story opens up cultural divides and promotes empathy. The chilling story paints a picture of the appalling conditions that Palestinians live. From the very beginning of the story the condition of the protagonist, Ichmad can be understood by seeing his sister tore apart by landmines from these words. He thought he saw something. Her arm was visible to me. Though her body was no longer joined to it, it was still her arm. He dabbed at his tears. Their watchdog had ripped it apart, leaving Amal broken pieces like her toy. He felt like he was about to burst into two as he let out a loud cry. (Corasanti, 2013, p.15.16)

Corasanti's novel, *The Almond Tree*, delves deeply into the subjects of cultural trauma, complicated traumatic occurrences, and cognitive empathy. It follows a young Palestinian boy named Ichmad Hamid and his family as they make their way through the region's complicated and frequently deadly political terrain against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also explores the intricate psychological and emotional ramifications of trauma on people and communities, as well as the function of empathy in healing, via Ichmad's experiences. The researcher will

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delve into the book's topics in this paper, looking at Corasanti's use of storytelling to highlight the destructive nature of conflict and the role empathy plays in the healing process.

This research explores the concepts of cognitive empathy and cultural trauma via the prism of intricately painful experiences. It provides readers with a distinctive and impactful examination of the human experience in the setting of conflict and misfortune, thanks to its captivating narrative and intricately crafted characters. It is set in turbulent times in Palestine, presents the character of Ichmad Hamid, a young Palestinian child with an extraordinary mind and a voracious need for information. Ichmad's resolute will and fortitude carry him through the difficult circumstances of his upbringing and the political unrest that accompanied it, molding his transition from boyhood to maturity.

Readers are drawn into Ichmad's world by Corasanti's evocative storytelling, and they come to fully comprehend the difficulties he encounters and the sacrifices he must make in order to survive. As Ichmad traverses difficult relationships, cultural hurdles, and the lingering repercussions of trauma, the story shows us the tremendous influence of cognitive empathy.

Ichmad's journey is expertly portrayed by Corasanti, inspiring the reader to consider their own sensitivity and comprehension. The readers are made aware of the harsh realities of cultural trauma and the long-lasting effects it can have on people through his experiences. This novel explores the intricate mechanics of conflict and its far-reaching effects, which acts as a catalyst for critical analysis and in-depth reflection on the shared need to develop empathy and advance healing.

Throughout the novel, Corasanti deftly combines themes of fortitude, optimism, and the value of education in the face of hardship. Readers are reminded of the transforming power of education and its capacity to spark change and bridge divisions through Ichmad's constant quest of knowledge and personal improvement.

The idea of cultural trauma and its significant effects on people and communities is a fascinating issue that permeates in this paper. This research investigates the lingering repercussions of catastrophic events on a personal and societal level, diving into the intricacies of human experiences.

The magnificent literary masterpiece *The Almond Tree* pushes the reader to acknowledge and overcome their own prejudices and assumptions while embracing tolerance and understanding in the face of cultural pain. As Ichmad's story is fully immersed in the reader, they are forced to consider their own contributions to the advancement of justice, peace, and healing. In this paper, cognitive empathy is used as a method to dismantle barriers, dispel myths, and cultivate compassion for people who have gone through trauma and cultural difficulties. Readers are taken to a world where empathy serves as a bridge to link disparate cultures, experiences, and viewpoints through the power of literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When exploring complicated traumatic events and cultural trauma, it is imperative to comprehend cognitive empathy and its significance in literature. Cognitive empathy is the capacity to comprehend and relate to the ideas, emotions, and viewpoints of another. When it comes to literary context, cognitive empathy enables readers to establish a strong emotional connection with the characters and their stories, facilitating a deeper examination of intricate issues.

Cognitive empathy, also known as empathic accuracy, is defined as possessing a more thorough and accurate understanding of the thoughts and feelings of another person, according to Hodges and Myers Encyclopedia of Social Psychology. In a way, cognitive empathy is a skill. In order to interpret emotions and behavior, humans learn to identify and comprehend the emotional states of others.

Through examining cognitive empathy in literary works, readers can acquire a more comprehensive comprehension of the intricacies associated with traumatic incidents and cultural trauma. It pushes people to examine their own prejudices, widen their horizons, and grow more sympathetic and perceptive of other people.

Cultural trauma refers to the deep wounds inflicted upon a community or society as a result of historical events, social upheavals, or systemic injustices. It shapes the collective memory and identity of a group, leaving an indelible mark

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on the psyche of individuals who have lived through such experiences. Ichmad and his family are shown throughout the novel navigating the harsh reality of occupation, displacement, and the loss of loved ones, all of which cause them to suffer from cultural trauma.

Since literature allows readers to enter other people's shoes and experience their reality, it is an effective tool for promoting cognitive empathy. By use of striking descriptions, intricate character development, and thought-provoking stories, writers such as Corasanti establish an emotional space where readers can relate to and identify with the characters deeply.

Immersed in Ichmad's narration, readers are forced to understand the complex consequences of trauma and intercultural strife, as well as to place themselves in his position and experience the world from his perspective. It enables to comprehend the characters' internal conflicts, emotional upheaval, and psychological challenges in addition to the external signs of trauma thanks to this cognitive empathy.

In examining violence and sorrow on both a global and personal level, the American and Canadian writers have dug into the issue of cognitive empathy in their various texts. Through their deft narrative, these books evoke readers' empathy as they address horrifying murders and deep personal grief. Novelists that masterfully elicit reader empathy include Toni Morrison's 1987 "Beloved," Alice Munro's work "Lives of Girls and Women," Michael Ondaatje's feat "Anil's Ghost," "Tim O'Brien's 1994 "In the Lake of the Woods," and Margaret Atwood's feat 1996 "Alias Grace"

According to Sigmund Freud, trauma is defined as overwhelming fear and agony that results in unmanageable emotions and a shattered personality, rather than just physical pain. Freud highlighted the hysterical repercussions of the great war on people in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The affected individuals have nightmares and have abnormal lives. They spend the rest of their lives dealing with distressing intrusive recollections. People find it difficult to adapt to society as a result of the effects and ramifications of conflict.

The final line of the story, "Ahmadou", covered in blood, shaking with pain, burning with heat, would utter nothing," expresses Ahmadou's emotional states both implicitly and overtly. The pain, wounds, fever, and emotions of helplessness are likely to cause the readers significant physical discomfort. Since this bodily behavior immediately communicates the pain experience, "trembling with pain" is an explicit behavioral surge word (Bednarek, 2008).

A narrative of the conflict in Kashmir called *Curfewed Night* is another book that accurately captures the terrible circumstances and actual predicament in the ravine of Kashmir. It's a conflict between an individual narrative in a Kashmir that is in turmoil. Combining the words "painful" with "brilliant" seems out of place. *Curfewed Night*, however, is an anamoly that uses sporadic definitions for both terms. The grief and sorrow of the layperson forced to choose between surviving and giving in to the chaos are expressed in the following piece. The reader is demoralized and moved to tears by the detailed depiction of loss and sorrow. In actuality, it's a story of destroyed lives and abandoned houses.

"They beat us up with guns, staffs, hands. But that was nothing. They took you out to the lawn outside the building. You were asked to remove all your clothes, even your under wear. They tied you to a long ladder and placed it near a ditch filled with kerosene oil and red chili powder. They raised the ladder like a seesaw and pushed your head into the ditch…It was the beginning. They tied copper wire around your arms and gave high-voltage shocks. But the worst was when they inserted the copperwire into the penis and gave electric shocks." (Peer, 2011, p. 138).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Experts in social neuroscience have developed two concepts to help us understand empathy better. The first idea, dubbed Simulation Theory, according to Psychology Today, suggests that empathy is possible because, when witnessing another person go through an emotion, we "simulate" or "represent" that same experience in ourselves in order to understand what it's like.

According to several scientists, Simulation Theory completely contradicts the alternative scientific explanation for empathy. Theory of Mind, according to Psychology Today, is the ability to comprehend another person's thoughts and feelings in light of norms for acceptable thought and emotion patterns. This theory holds that people can use

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cognitive thought processes to comprehend the mental states of other people. According to this theory, humans can predict or explain other people's actions by developing ideas about human conduct.

According to Keen (2006, p. 16), cognitive empathy theory is concerned with the psychological and cognitive mechanisms involved in eliciting empathy through stories presented in films, books, and other forms of storytelling. It suggests that stories have the power to evoke intense emotions and create a sense of empathy for fictitious characters, allowing readers to experience those characters' emotions and experiences through a vicarious sense. This theory states that by telling stories, people can develop their emotional intelligence, have a better understanding of other people's perspectives, and develop a greater sense of empathy for them (Keen, 2006, p. 13).

The belief that narratives—such as those found in books, movies, or stories—have the power to cause people to feel empathy is the foundation of the cognitive empathy theory (Keen, 2010, p. 21). It suggests people can emotionally relate to characters and their circumstances through storytelling, which leads to a better capacity for empathy towards others. Cognizant of the characters' circumstances, emotions, and obstacles, cognitive empathy involves putting oneself in their shoes. This concept underscores the ability of tales to foster social and emotional growth, empathy, and understanding (Keen, 2010, p. 17).

Trauma storytelling use fiction stories to help readers access painful experiences while shedding light on the public and private aspects of trauma (Clair et al., 2014, p. 11). Various creative, intellectual, and testimonial expressions now heavily incorporate this technique. Furthermore, it elucidates our understanding of short-term memory loss and describes how a person with the condition forgets due to the interaction of social and psychological elements. The psychological ideas and feelings in traumatic narrative are also extensively discussed by theorists (Clair et al., 2014, p.12).

"By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively. By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. "We" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body." (Erikson 1976, p.12)

Moreover, Alexander contends that events lack inherent meaning before interpretation, urging cultural trauma analyses to scrutinize how events are construed as traumatic rather than presuming self-evident meanings (Alexander et.al, 2004, p.11). This necessitates focusing on the ontological 'gap between event and representation,' wherein cultural trauma unfolds as an interpretative struggle over event meaning (Alexander et. al, 2004, p.11). He identifies carrier groups as pivotal actors in this process, responsible for conveying interpretations to the broader community and constructing a compelling narrative or 'master narrative' (Alexander et. al, 2004, p.12).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Exceptional. Harrowing. Wonderfully astounding. This was too good to put down. The writer masterfully captures your interest from the very beginning. (The Reviews of Printed Word Books) Michelle Cohen Corasanti's inception *The Almond Tree* explores the complex processes of cultural trauma and how it affects both individuals and societies. Corasanti encourages to consider the long-term impacts of tragic events on both a personal and a societal level, as well as to investigate the difficulties of cognitive empathy, through a gripping story and vividly rendered characters.

From the very first chapter the horrified and complex traumatic event made horrified and gripped, the protagonist little sister, Amal, blew up by "chasing a big red butterfly"(p.15). "The sun was hot, but i felt cold" (p.17) is the condition of the reader to move with the story. "Without even knowing it, i had been holding my breath. when Baba lifted Amal's head...which was pretty much destroyed"(p.17)"where they buried the mines" (p.16)

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Corasanti's story is set against the turbulent backdrop of Palestine, where Ichmad and his family have to conquer many obstacles. The work of literature deftly captures the multifaceted effects of these horrific events on the lives of its people, from the loss of their ancestral land to the harsh realities of occupation.

"Wailing, Nadia pulled Sara from me and held her tightly. 'You killed my sister,' Abbas yelled. 'What do you want?'They aimed their Uzis at our house. 'Is everyone out?' Mama's voice was panicked. As the soldiers sprayed the house with bullets, my eyes combed the yard. Abbas. Nadia. Fadi. Hani. Sara's little body. They were all outside. 'Move away from the house!' the baby-faced soldier yelled. We were already outside; what more could they want? The lack of bulldozers had thrown me off. The soldiers entered the house with sticks of dynamite. We stood outside while they laid the charges. 'My father's innocent,' I said. The soldiers glared at me and I lowered my head. 'Of course he is,' Baby-Face taunted. 'Say goodbye to your house, terrorists!' a soldier said. My legs felt weak. 'Where will we live? Please,' I begged, a whining child, nothing like the man I wished I were. 'Shut up!' a soldier said. Abbas stood next to me. 'Arrest me instead,' I begged. 'Don't punish these children.' 'We don't want you,' Baby-Face said. Abbas stared at the soldiers with hatred in his eyes. Nadia clutched Sara's body tightly, as if she could protect her. I held onto Hani while he cried. Fadi picked up a stone, cocked his hand back. I grabbed his arm and pulled him into my embrace with Hani." (p.54)

Ichmad's life story examines the deep effects of cultural trauma on people. He explores the mental and emotional effects of constantly experiencing dread, uncertainty, and oppression.

The following lines from the text, Talk was cut off by the sound of military Jeeps barreling into their area. They were pelted by flying rocks as the engines screamed to a standstill. The protagonist's classmate Muhammad Ibn Abd dashed past them across the square, followed closely by two Uzis and steel-helmeted troops wearing face shields. They tossed him onto a tomato-covered sheet and rammed their Uzi stock into his skull, horrify the reader. Ichmad Hamid, the principal protagonist, is portrayed navigating a violent and deeply prejudiced world. Ichmad, who was raised in a Palestinian household, is exposed to the brutal reality of the struggle from an early age.

"I hurried to an area outside the gate where hundreds of other Palestinians sat on the ground and listened to a soldier call prisoners' names. There were women and children, old men, and other sons like me, alone. They were calling out the names of every prisoner, in order, while everyone waited. There was no shade. No water. Two hours later the soldier called 'Mahmud Hamid.' Guards swarmed towards me as I entered the detention centre. One asked, 'Who are you coming to see?' 'My father, Mahmud Hamid.' I tried to stand taller than my twelve years on earth allowed. I tried to be a man, unafraid. 'He's yours,' the guard said to someone behind me in Hebrew. He motioned for me to walk through the metal detector. An Uzi-bearing guard escorted me towards a door. Fear melted the muscles in my legs as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. Inside, guards groped naked men who stood against the wall. 'Strip,' my guard said. My trembling body refused to obey. 'Strip.' I willed my arms to move. Mechanically, I removed the shirt Mama had made for me the previous day from a used sheet. For hours, she had searched through the jars at the village square until she found matching buttons. The rest of the day she had spent stitching it together by hand, using dark thread to make each buttonhole. The guard extended his rubbergloved hand, grabbed the shirt from me and tossed it on the dirty floor. 'Everything off.' I slipped off my sandals, trousers and underwear, laid them next to my shirt and stood naked before the guard with my eyes glued to the floor. 'Against the wall.' Trembling, I leaned forward. 'Shake your head.' I shook my head. The guard ran his gloved fingers through my hair as the smell of cigarettes on his breath soured my stomach. He thrust my head back and shone a light into my nose and mouth. I closed my eyes. After a metal probe was inserted into my nose and the crevices of my ears, I tasted blood. What was he looking for? I wouldn't scream or whimper or beg. The gloved hands proceeded down my body to my buttocks and legs, which the guard kicked apart. I squeezed my eyes tighter and thought of Baba. Baba who was here because of me. I could endure anything to see him again... Humiliated and naked, I stood before the guard, a person not that much older than me, while he examined every millimetre of my clothes." (p. 63-64)

This side of trauma, which is also a key component of system-induced or created trauma, includes a large number of systems that are intended to cause various forms of social and collective pain in order to compel people to submit. Together with the individual experiences of trauma, social and systemic trauma must be examined. Although each person is capable of healing from their own experiences, they are still a part of the contemporary culture, where

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trauma is a constant. Experiences are nevertheless affected and shaped by the family, community, and social environments. A key component of this practice is the merging of working with social and personal trauma.

Two qualities that are present in communities include a high degree of isolation or distance between individuals or between individuals and a group of people, and an inadequate level of communal ideals that define the concept of trauma of alienation, which has been developed by a number of classical and contemporary theorists. A person's state of mind as well as particular kinds of social interaction can be referred to by this idea, which has several applications across various disciplines. There is fear in the protagonist's voice which carried abandonment a sense of fut and perhaps a hint of deadness. He is being overcome by his estrangement in the desolate and dark region. The novel's prose is cognitively empathetic to the story in every single sentence. The protagonist's depressing and estranged state made the piece tearful.

"Five minutes before the curfew, I returned to the tent exhausted, Baba's whereabouts still unknown. For the next six weeks, I continued to stand in line all day, every day, with no luck. I no longer went to school." (p.59) "After working with Jews to run the home, the people of the village "glared at us as if we were vermin."(p.74) "At lunchtime, we all grabbed our paper sacks from the back of the truck and retreated to our usual places. Abbas and I ate alone." (p.77)

A person's sense of belonging to a group is referred to as their collective identity. An individual's identity is infused with elements of the group identity, or the collective and the protagonist's struggle for collective identity like many other Palestinians gripped the story from the very beginning till end.

I gritted my teeth together so hard my jaw hurt. Baba didn't see things the way Abbas and I did. Uncollected rubbish, donkey dung and flies littered the path. We paid taxes but received no services because they classified us as a village. They stole the majority of our land and left us with one half of a square kilometre for over six thousand Palestinians. 'People don't treat other human beings the way they treat us,' I said. (p.34)

CONCLUSION

The prose is powerful and evocative. (Hindu Business Line) The study has attempted to investigate the book The Almond Tree from the theoretical angles of collective identity and cultural trauma. The Almond Tree is regarded as an interactive fiction book that effectively employs narrative strategy to educate readers about narrative tactics in a broad sense. The purpose of this article is to increase awareness of complicated traumatic experiences in narratives and cognitive empathy. The Almond Tree, like many other interactive fictional narrative novels, subverts conventional realist approaches by emphasizing provisionality, contradiction, heterogeneity, and irreconcilable internal inconsistencies over homogeneity and consistency.

The article's goal is to bring attention to dramatic, horrific incidents that are described in a way that amplifies how the suffering is understood. The story consistently emphasizes the horrific reality experienced by both individuals and cultures through the amplification of the trauma and cognitive empathy.

Conflict of Interest:

"None" or "The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest".

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