University of Hormozgan

Iranian Journal of Educational Research

Print ISSN: 1735 - 563X Online ISSN: 2980 - 874X

Homepage: http://ijer.hormozgan.ac.ir

Educational and Behavioral Research Center

The Psyche and the City: Interiority, Sublimation, and the Transnational Circuitry of Trauma in Rabih Alameddine's An Unnecessary Woman and Laila Lalami's The Other Americans

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received 12 Apr. 2026
Received in revised form 18 Aug. 2026
Accepted 20 Oct. 2026
Published online 01 Mar. 2027

Keywords:
Trauma,
Interiority,
Sublimation,
Post memory,
Transnationalism,
Arab American Literature,
Rabih Alameddine,
Laila Lalami

ABSTRACT

Objective: This article examines the formal and thematic representation of trauma in Rabih Alameddine's An Unnecessary Woman (2014) and Laila Lalami's The Other Americans (2019). It aims to show that both novels move beyond narrating catastrophic events to interrogate the psychic architecture of survival.

Methods: Using close reading informed by trauma theory and post memory (Hirsch, 2012), the study analyzes how interiority and domestic space, translation (Alameddine), musical composition (Lalami), mundane objects, routines, familial silences, polyvocality, intertextuality, and narrative endings operate in each text. It also traces the transnational circuitry of trauma: from the Lebanese Civil War into a global literary geography, and from Moroccan political violence and post-9/11 suspicion into the American Mojave Desert.

Results: The analysis shows that interiority and domestic space function as ambivalent fortresses, serving both as shelters from and prisons of traumatic memory. Translation and musical composition operate as forms of sublimation and narrative repair, yet they also expose the limits of representation. Mundane objects, routines, and familial silences act as vectors of post memory, transmitting inherited trauma across generations. Polyvocality and intertextuality formally figure a fractured collective psyche.

Conclusions: The novels' ambiguous endings refuse closure and position the reader as a secondary witness to ongoing traumatic memory (Felman & Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1996). The study contributes to scholarship on Arab American fiction, trauma theory, and the ethics of literary witnessing.

Cite this article: Al-Obaidi, H. & Hanif, M. (2027). The psyche and the city: Interiority, sublimation, and the transnational circuitry of trauma in Rabih Alameddine's An Unnecessary Woman and Laila Lalami's The Other Americans. *Iranian Journal of Educational Research*, *6*(1), 1-17.

. DOI: https://doi.org/

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Publisher: University of Hormozgan.
DOI: https://doi.org/

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Introduction

The relationship between psychic life and the spaces that contain it has long preoccupied literary modernism, but in contemporary Arab American fiction it acquires a particular urgency. For writers tracing the afterlife of war, displacement, and racialized violence, the interior, both the room and the psyche, becomes a contested terrain where the past is simultaneously preserved and besieged. Rabih Alameddine's An Unnecessary Woman (2014) and Laila Lalami's The Other Americans (2019) are exemplary in this regard. Each novel stages trauma not as a discrete historical event but as an ongoing condition that shapes subjectivity, domesticity, and the very possibility of narrative. Alameddine's protagonist, a seventy-two-year-old Beiruti translator named Aaliya, has spent five decades translating canonical works into Arabic without publishing a single one; her apartment, filled with the detritus of a life lived through literature, becomes the stage for a meditation on solitude, survival, and the consolations and failures of art. Lalami's polyvocal novel, structured around the hit-and-run death of a Moroccan immigrant in a California desert town, distributes traumatic knowledge across multiple narrators, a jazz composer daughter, a traumatized veteran, an undocumented witness, a detective, each of whom inhabits a private fortress of silence, denial, or isolation.

This article argues that both novels formalize trauma as a spatial and psychic architecture. It contends, first, that interiority and domestic space function as ambivalent fortresses, shelters that protect the traumatized subject from a hostile world while also imprisoning them within the repetitions of the past. Second, it argues that translation for Aaliya and musical composition for Nora operate as forms of sublimation and narrative repair that nevertheless expose the limits of language and representation. Third, it examines how mundane objects, routines, and familial silences transmit post memory and inherited trauma across generations (Hirsch, 2012). Fourth, it traces the transnational circuitry of trauma, from Beirut to the global republic of letters, and from Morocco and post-9/11 America to the Mojave Desert, demonstrating how polyvocality and intertextuality formally figure a fractured collective psyche. Finally, it contends that the novels' ambiguous or unresolved endings refuse closure, positioning the reader as a secondary witness to ongoing traumatic memory (Felman & Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1996).

The study draws on four interconnected theoretical frameworks. Trauma theory, as developed by Caruth (1996), defines trauma as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the

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attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (p. 4). Trauma, in this account, is experienced "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" and returns belatedly through intrusive symptoms (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). LaCapra (2001) distinguishes between "acting out", the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes, and "working through", the gradual integration of trauma into narrative memory. However, trauma theory has been challenged for its Eurocentric assumptions. Craps (2013) calls for a "decolonized" trauma studies attentive to colonial and neocolonial violence, while Salam (2022) argues that Caruth's model of trauma as belated and passive cannot adequately account for experiences characterized by "continuous traumatic stress" rather than a discrete past event. For Palestinians, as Jabr (2019) observes, "there is no 'post' because the trauma is repetitive and ongoing and continuous" (as cited in Salam, 2022). This study therefore adopts a modified trauma framework that acknowledges the formal insights of Caruth and LaCapra while attending to the ongoing, collective, and agentic dimensions of traumatic memory emphasized by Salam and Mahfouz (2020) and Salam (2022).

Postmemory, as theorized by Hirsch (2012), describes "the experience of those who belong to the 'generation after,' whose own identities are shaped by 'experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right'"(p. 5). Postmemory is transmitted through family stories, photographs, material objects, and embodied behaviors, and is distinguished "from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection" (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). In the Arab American context, postmemory is complicated by the ongoing nature of both the Lebanese Civil War's aftermath and the racialized violence directed at Arab Americans after 9/11. The concept is nonetheless indispensable for understanding how later generations inherit and negotiate traumatic legacies they did not directly experience. Affective geography, as developed by Anderson (2016), argues that affect "circulates, accumulates, and sticks to particular sites and scenes" (p. 77); space is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in the production and transmission of emotion and memory. For displaced and traumatized populations, specific places, a lost apartment, a desert cabin, a city under siege, become saturated with affective significance (Awad, 2020; Madiou, 2021). Narrative theory, particularly Frank's (1995) concept of the "chaos narrative," in which events are experienced "without sequence or discernible causality" (pp. 97–98), and his notion of "narrative repair" (pp. 53–55), provides a framework for understanding how storytelling can reassemble a shattered sense

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of self. Rothberg's (2009) concept of "multidirectional memory," in which different traumatic histories interact and illuminate one another without being reduced to equivalence, is also central to this study's comparative approach.

A growing body of scholarship has examined trauma, memory, and diaspora in both novels. Studies of An Unnecessary Woman have focused on solitude, abjection, and translation. Madiou (2021) argues that the Lebanese Civil War "is not the originator of the characters' feeling of abjection" but rather "activates" a universal human condition, and that Aaliya's translation practice functions as a symbolic challenge to abjection. Belwefi (2026) analyzes the novel through LaCapra's concepts of "acting out" and "working through," concluding that "working through remains an unlikely, if not an unattainable, process" for the characters. Pickens (2013) examines the hospital scenes in Alameddine's fiction, arguing that characters "do not find the state of so-called normalcy or belonging curative" and "prefer illness and exile because return and wellness do not offer rest or peace" (p. 68). Hout (2011) situates the novel within a tradition of diasporic anglophone Lebanese fiction concerned with "cultural hybridity, trauma, and memory." AlRawahi and Al Ahdai (2026) read Aaliya's solitude as a "site of diasporic self-translation," arguing that "isolation is not simply social failure or pathology; it is a field in which diasporic identity is lived, tested, and inscribed."

Studies of The Other Americans have focused on the novel's polyvocal structure and its engagement with race, immigration, and trauma. Taşyakan (2024) describes the novel's multiple narrators as "an autonomous entity that acts as an agent and moves through the minds of the characters and the plot to virulently transmit fear and violence." Mohtar (2020) explores how the novel "interrogates the culture of surveillance and suspicion directed at Arab Americans" after 9/11. He (2021) reads the novel as a "democratic narrative project" that reflects "the multiplicity of contemporary American identity." Deakins (2019) analyzes "sentimental arcs from grief to mourning" in the novel, arguing that its endings "allow for a tenuous sentimental resolution" while leaving "unresolved questions" (p. 34). Comparative studies of the two novels remain rare, and this article addresses that gap by bringing them into dialogue through a shared set of theoretical concerns: interiority, sublimation, postmemory, transnationalism, and the ethics of unresolved endings.

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Despite this rich body of scholarship, several gaps remain. Most studies focus on either novel individually; comparative analyses are scarce. While scholars have analyzed trauma, memory, and diaspora in both novels, few studies have systematically examined how interiority and domestic space formalize trauma as a psychic architecture. The role of translation and music as forms of sublimation and narrative repair has not been adequately theorized in relation to both novels. The transnational circuitry of trauma has been addressed in relation to individual novels but not comparatively across both. The tension between the political imperative to testify and the psychological impossibility of full articulation has been noted but not systematically analyzed in relation to the novels' formal strategies of repetition, refusal of closure, and narrative reclamation. This study therefore has five objectives: to analyze how interiority and domestic space formalize trauma as both protected and imprisoned psychic life; to examine how translation and musical composition function as forms of sublimation and narrative repair while exposing the limits of language and representation; to investigate how mundane objects, routines, and family silences transmit postmemory and inherited trauma; to trace the transnational circuitry of trauma and analyze how polyvocality and intertextuality figure a fractured collective psyche; and to explore how the novels' ambiguous or unresolved endings refuse closure and position the reader as a secondary witness. The study was guided by the following five research questions:

How do interiority and domestic space, Aaliya's Beirut apartment and the various "fortresses" of silence, isolation, and denial in The Other Americans, formalize trauma as both protected and imprisoned psychic life?

How do translation in An Unnecessary Woman and music/composition in The Other Americans function as forms of sublimation and "narrative repair" while also exposing the limits of language and representation?

How do mundane objects, routines, and family silences transmit postmemory and inherited trauma in the two novels?

How does trauma travel transnationally, from the Lebanese Civil War and Beirut into global literary geography, and from Moroccan political violence and post-9/11 anti-Arab suspicion into the Mojave Desert, and how do polyvocality and intertextuality figure a fractured collective psyche?

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How do the novels' ambiguous or unresolved endings refuse closure and position the reader as a secondary witness to ongoing traumatic memory?

Material and Methods

This study employed a qualitative, comparative literary analysis of Rabih Alameddine's An Unnecessary Woman (2014) and Laila Lalami's The Other Americans (2019). The methodology combined close reading of the primary texts with the application of theoretical frameworks drawn from trauma theory, postmemory, affective geography, and narrative theory.

The primary texts were read closely, with attention to narrative structure, characterization, imagery, symbolism, and the representation of trauma, memory, and displacement. Specific passages were selected for analysis based on their relevance to the five research questions. The analysis focused on the representation of interiority and domestic space; the function of translation and musical composition as sublimatory practices; the role of material objects, routines, and family silences; the transnational dimensions of trauma and the use of polyvocality and intertextuality; and the formal strategies of repetition, refusal of closure, and narrative reclamation.

Secondary sources were consulted to situate the analysis within existing scholarship on the two novels and on Arab American literature more broadly. Theoretical texts by Caruth (1996), Hirsch (2012), LaCapra (2001), Anderson (2016), Frank (1995), and Rothberg (2009) provided the conceptual framework. Recent scholarship on the two novels, including Madiou (2021), Belwefi (2026), Pickens (2013), Hout (2011), AlRawahi and Al Ahdai (2026), Taşyakan (2024), Mohtar (2020), He (2021), and Deakins (2019), was used for comparison and contextualization.

The analysis proceeded in five stages, corresponding to the five research questions. First, the representation of interiority and domestic space was analyzed through the lens of affective geography. Second, translation and music were examined as sublimatory practices and forms of narrative repair. Third, material objects, routines, and silences were analyzed as vectors of postmemory. Fourth, the transnational circuitry of trauma and the formal functions of polyvocality and intertextuality were traced. Fifth, the novels' endings were analyzed for their refusal of closure and their positioning of the reader as a secondary witness. The study was limited to two novels, which means that the findings may not be generalizable to all Arab American fiction; however,

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the depth of the comparative analysis provides insights that can be tested and extended in future research.

Results

The analysis yielded five principal findings, corresponding to the five research questions. The first finding concerns the formalization of trauma through interiority and domestic space. Both novels construct domestic space as an ambivalent fortress. In An Unnecessary Woman, Aaliya's Beirut apartment is both a sanctuary and a prison. The apartment shelters her from the chaos of the civil war and the intrusions of family and neighbors. As Aaliya declares, "My home, my apartment; in it I live, and move, and have my being" (Alameddine, 2014, p. 17). The apartment is a space of control, where she can organize her books, her translations, and her daily routines. Yet the apartment is also a space of confinement. Aaliya's solitude, chosen though it may be, is also a form of self-imprisonment. The novel's opening image, Aaliya shampooing her hair blue while gazing into a smudged mirror, establishes the apartment as a space of distorted self-perception. As the Guardian review observes, the novel is "a book in which almost nothing happens" but which "overflows with the interior dialogue between Aaliya and her literary life" (Syndetics, 2015). In The Other Americans, the "fortresses" of silence, isolation, and denial are distributed across multiple characters. Nora's cabin in Joshua Tree becomes a retreat from the world, but it is also a space haunted by her father's infidelity. After discovering her father's affair, Nora "purges the cabin of any reminders" of him, buying "new bedding and furnishings in an attempt to cleanse her surroundings" (Lalami, 2019). Jeremy, the traumatized veteran, constructs a fortress of isolation around himself, avoiding intimacy and connection. Efraín, the undocumented witness, makes himself invisible, a fortress of invisibility that protects him from deportation but also imprisons him in silence. As the novel observes, "The silence cloaked me with safety, but it betrayed me" (Lalami, 2019). The novel's domestic spaces, the Guerraoui family home, the diner, the cabin, are all sites where trauma is simultaneously sheltered and confined.

The second finding concerns translation and music as sublimation and narrative repair. In An Unnecessary Woman, translation is the central sublimatory practice. Aaliya translates canonical works of Western literature into Arabic, not for publication but for the private pleasure of the work itself. Translation, for Aaliya, is "a source of comfort, a way to turn what is 'void' into

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'sublimation'" (Madiou, 2021). It is a ritual of ordering and control in a world that feels chaotic and threatening. As Aaliya reflects, "How safe I will feel once I begin my translation" (Alameddine, 2014, p. 24). Translation also functions as a form of narrative repair. By entering into the language and consciousness of another writer, Aaliya temporarily escapes the confines of her own traumatic history. She describes the experience as one in which she is "no longer [her] usual self, yet [she is] wholeheartedly [herself, body and spirit]" (Alameddine, 2014, p. 109). Yet translation also exposes the limits of representation. Aaliya's translations are never published, never read by anyone else. They accumulate in boxes in her maid's room and bathroom, a material archive of a life's work that is invisible to the world. When a flood damages her manuscripts, Aaliya is forced to confront the fragility of her sublimatory practice. The translations are "damaged by water," their pages "written in a foreign language that I must translate, retranslate" (Alameddine, 2014). The flood reveals that the "void" of trauma cannot be permanently filled; the "sublimation" is always temporary, always precarious. In The Other Americans, music and composition function in analogous ways. Nora is a jazz composer, and her music is both a refuge and a mode of expression that exceeds language. Nora has synaesthesia, experiencing music as colour, and this condition gives her access to "emotions and experiences that cannot be put into words." Her compositions are acts of "narrative repair," attempts to impose order on the chaos of her grief. As she reflects, "As my fingers moved on the keys, I felt as if I were speaking to my bandmates" (Lalami, 2019). Music becomes a language of its own, a way of communicating what cannot be said. Yet music also has its limits. Nora's compositions are rejected by festivals as "too cerebral," and her art is not always understood by those around her. The novel's title itself, The Other Americans, suggests the limits of representation: some experiences cannot be fully incorporated into the national narrative.

The third finding concerns mundane objects, routines, and family silences as vectors of postmemory. In both novels, objects and routines function as material anchors of memory. In An Unnecessary Woman, Aaliya's objects, her books, her translations, her notebooks, her 2B pencils, are not merely possessions but material anchors of memory. Aaliya's ritual of preparing for a new translation each January 1st is a "rite of purification" that connects her to the past and gives structure to the present (Madiou, 2021). The objects in her apartment are saturated with affective significance, carrying the weight of a lifetime of reading, writing, and surviving. In The Other

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Americans, objects also function as postmemorial vectors. The photograph of Nora's uncle, the Pan Am bag that appears in Maryam's memory, and the engagement ring that Driss ordered for his lover are all objects that transmit traumatic knowledge across generations. The Pan Am bag, in particular, is a material trace of the family's migration from Morocco: "It is blue and white and has a hole in one corner" (Lalami, 2019). The bag reappears in Maryam's nightmares, a recurring image of displacement and loss. As Hirsch (2012) argues, postmemory is transmitted through "material objects" as well as through stories and photographs (p. 21). Family silences are equally important vectors of postmemory. In The Other Americans, the Guerraoui family's silence about their Moroccan past is a form of protection, but it is also a form of imprisonment. As the novel observes, "The threat of political violence that drove Nora's parents to leave Morocco is given expression in Maryam's quiet melancholy, her regret at losing her homeland" (Lalami, 2019). The silence about the past prevents Nora and Salma from fully understanding their own heritage. In An Unnecessary Woman, the silence surrounding Aaliya's mother, her mysterious scream, her withdrawal into dementia, is a silence that Aaliya spends her life trying to translate. The scream becomes the "crypt" at the heart of Aaliya's narrative, a sound that resists meaning even as it demands interpretation (Madiou, 2021).

The fourth finding concerns the transnational circuitry of trauma and the formal functions of polyvocality and intertextuality. Trauma in both novels travels transnationally. In An Unnecessary Woman, the Lebanese Civil War is the foundational trauma, but it is mediated through Aaliya's reading of world literature. Aaliya translates Sebald, Bolaño, and Pessoa, writers who themselves grapple with trauma, exile, and memory. The novel thus situates the Lebanese Civil War within a global literary geography of trauma. As Madiou (2021) argues, Aaliya's translation practice connects her to "a global literary tradition" while also isolating her in her Beirut apartment. The novel's intertextuality, its dense web of references to canonical literature, figures a fractured collective psyche, a consciousness that is constituted through the voices of others. In The Other Americans, trauma travels from Morocco to the United States. Driss's memories of the Casablanca protests of 1981, the arson of his donut shop after 9/11, and his death in the Mojave Desert are all linked in a transnational circuitry of violence. The novel's polyvocal structure, its multiple narrators, including Nora, Jeremy, Efraín, Maryam, Coleman, and Driss himself, formally enacts the fragmentation of collective memory. As Taşyakan (2024) argues, "The polyphonic form of…

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The Other Americans enables the novel to challenge America's post-9/11 narrative." The novel's intertextuality, its references to the Qur'an, to American popular culture, to the literature of immigration, creates a layered textual surface that mirrors the layered traumatic histories of its characters. The desert itself becomes a palimpsest, a landscape that holds the traces of indigenous dispossession, immigrant aspiration, and racial violence.

The fifth finding concerns the novels' ambiguous endings and the positioning of the reader as a secondary witness. Both novels refuse closure. An Unnecessary Woman ends not with resolution but with a moment of ambiguous possibility. After the flood damages her translations, Aaliya contemplates beginning again. The novel's final lines, "I take a long breath, the air of anticipation" (Alameddine, 2014), suggest a tentative openness to the future, but they do not promise healing. As Belwefi (2026) argues, "the prospect of working through remains a far-fetched and well-nigh impossible endeavor" for Aaliya. The ending refuses the consolations of narrative closure, insisting instead on the ongoing nature of the trauma. The Other Americans similarly refuses closure. The novel's final chapters bring the plot to a kind of resolution, the mystery of Driss's death is solved, and Nora and Jeremy tentatively reunite, but the novel's emotional and political questions remain open. As Deakins (2019) observes, the ending "allows for a tenuous sentimental resolution" while leaving "unresolved questions" (p. 34). The reader is left with a sense of "a different kind of pain," a pain that "wasn't relief… wasn't closure" (Lalami, 2019). The novel positions the reader as what Felman and Laub (1992) call a "secondary witness," someone who receives the testimony of trauma and is ethically implicated in its transmission. By refusing closure, both novels insist that trauma is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be witnessed.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that both novels construct domestic space as an ambivalent fortress, a shelter that protects the traumatized subject from a hostile world while also confining them within the repetitions of the past. In An Unnecessary Woman, Aaliya's apartment is the primary site of this ambivalence. As AlRawahi and Al Ahdai (2026) argue, "Aaliya's apartment is both refuge and crucible: a space in which isolation becomes instrument, a place where language performs the work of survival." Yet the apartment is also a prison. Aaliya's solitude, chosen though it may be, is also a form of self-confinement. When the apartment's borders are breached, by her

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half-brother depositing their mother at her door, or by the flood that damages her translations, Aaliya is forced to confront the vulnerability of her fortress. In The Other Americans, the fortresses are more distributed but equally ambivalent. Nora's cabin is a retreat from the world, but it is also a space haunted by her father's infidelity. Jeremy's isolation protects him from the demands of intimacy, but it also imprisons him in his own traumatic memories. Efraín's invisibility protects him from deportation, but it also traps him in silence. The novel's domestic spaces are thus sites where trauma is both sheltered and confined. This finding is consistent with the work of Anderson (2016) on affective geography and with Pickens' (2013) analysis of Alameddine's fiction, which argues that his characters "prefer illness and exile because return and wellness do not offer rest or peace" (p. 68). The fortress is not a solution to trauma; it is a way of managing it, and management is always precarious.

The study further finds that translation and music function as forms of sublimation and narrative repair while exposing the limits of representation. Aaliya's translation practice is a form of sublimation in the Kristevan sense: it transforms the "void" of trauma into a symbolic form, giving it shape and meaning (Madiou, 2021). Translation is a ritual of ordering and control, a way of making the world manageable, and a form of narrative repair that allows Aaliya to reassemble a shattered sense of self through engagement with the words of others. Yet translation also exposes the limits of representation. Aaliya's translations are never published, never read; they are stored in boxes, invisible to the world. When the flood damages them, the material fragility of her sublimatory practice is revealed. The translations are not a cure for trauma; they are a temporary shelter, always vulnerable to the intrusions of the real. Nora's music functions in a similar way. Her compositions are acts of narrative repair, attempts to impose order on the chaos of her grief. Music gives her access to emotions and experiences that exceed language, and her synaesthesia is a form of perception that is both a gift and a burden. Yet music also has its limits. Nora's compositions are rejected by festivals, and her art is not always understood by those around her. This finding is consistent with Frank's (1995) concept of "narrative repair" and with Caruth's (1996) argument that trauma resists full representation. The novels suggest that sublimation is not a solution but a practice, a way of living with trauma rather than overcoming it.

The study also finds that mundane objects, routines, and family silences transmit postmemory and inherited trauma. In An Unnecessary Woman, Aaliya's objects, her books, her translations, her

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notebooks, are material anchors of memory. Her routines, the January 1st preparation, the ceremonial bath, the lighting of candles, are rituals that connect her to the past and give structure to the present. As Madiou (2021) argues, these routines are "rites of purification" that "prevent the encroachment of 'abject' on one's private space." They are also vectors of postmemory, transmitting the trauma of the civil war and the losses of Aaliya's life across time. In The Other Americans, objects such as the Pan Am bag and the engagement ring are similarly postmemorial, carrying the weight of the family's Moroccan past into the American present. The family's silences about the past, Maryam's quiet melancholy, the unspoken history of political violence, are also vectors of postmemory. As Hirsch (2012) argues, postmemory is transmitted through "silence around certain topics" as well as through explicit narration. The silence is both a protection and a limitation: it shields the family from painful memories, but it also prevents the younger generation from fully understanding their heritage. This finding is consistent with Hirsch's (2012) theory of postmemory and with recent scholarship on the transmission of trauma in Arab American literature (Salama et al., 2026; Noreen & Ahmad, 2024). It extends these theories by demonstrating how objects and silences operate specifically within the context of Lebanese and Moroccan diasporic experience.

Furthermore, the study finds that trauma travels transnationally, and that polyvocality and intertextuality figure a fractured collective psyche. In An Unnecessary Woman, the Lebanese Civil War is mediated through Aaliya's reading of world literature. Her translations of Sebald, Bolaño, and Pessoa connect her to a global tradition of writing about trauma, exile, and memory. The novel's intertextuality, its dense web of references to canonical literature, figures a consciousness that is constituted through the voices of others. As Hout (2011) argues, Alameddine's fiction is characterized by "cultural hybridity or in-betweenness," and this hybridity is formally enacted through intertextuality. In The Other Americans, trauma travels from Morocco to the United States. Driss's memories of the Casablanca protests, the arson of his donut shop, and his death in the Mojave Desert are all linked in a transnational circuitry of violence. The novel's polyvocal structure formally enacts the fragmentation of collective memory. As Taşyakan (2024) argues, the novel's polyphony "challenge[s] America's post-9/11 narrative." The desert itself becomes a palimpsest, a landscape that holds the traces of indigenous dispossession, immigrant aspiration, and racial violence. This finding is consistent with Rothberg's (2009) theory of "multidirectional

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memory" and with recent scholarship on transnational trauma in Arab American literature (Salam, 2022; Hout, 2011). It extends these theories by demonstrating how polyvocality and intertextuality formally figure the fractured collective psyche of diasporic communities.

Finally, the study finds that the novels' ambiguous endings refuse closure and position the reader as a secondary witness. An Unnecessary Woman ends with Aaliya contemplating a new beginning, but the novel does not promise that this beginning will be successful. The flood has damaged her translations, and the "void" of trauma remains. As Belwefi (2026) argues, "the prospect of working through remains a far-fetched and well-nigh impossible endeavor." The Other Americans ends with a tenuous reunion between Nora and Jeremy, but the novel's deeper questions about race, justice, and belonging remain unanswered. As Deakins (2019) observes, the ending "allows for a tenuous sentimental resolution" while leaving "unresolved questions" (p. 34). By refusing closure, both novels position the reader as a secondary witness to ongoing traumatic memory. The reader is not offered the comfort of a resolved narrative but is instead invited to bear witness to the persistence of trauma and to the ethical demands of remembrance. This finding is consistent with Felman and Laub's (1992) theory of testimony and with Caruth's (1996) argument that trauma resists full representation. It extends these theories by demonstrating how the refusal of closure can function as an ethical strategy, positioning the reader as a witness rather than a consumer of trauma narratives.

In conclusion, this study has examined how An Unnecessary Woman and The Other Americans formalize trauma through interiority, sublimation, postmemory, transnational circuitry, and the refusal of closure. It has argued that domestic space functions as an ambivalent fortress, a shelter that protects and a prison that confines. It has demonstrated that translation and music operate as forms of sublimation and narrative repair while exposing the limits of language and representation. It has traced how mundane objects, routines, and family silences transmit postmemory and inherited trauma. It has shown how trauma travels transnationally, and how polyvocality and intertextuality figure a fractured collective psyche. Finally, it has contended that the novels' ambiguous endings refuse closure, positioning the reader as a secondary witness to ongoing traumatic memory. The implications of this study are several. It demonstrates the analytical value of bringing together trauma theory, postmemory, affective geography, and narrative theory in a single framework. It contributes to the ongoing project of "decolonizing" trauma theory by

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showing how Arab American fiction both draws on and transforms Euro-American paradigms. It provides a framework for understanding the formal and thematic complexity of two major novels that are increasingly taught in courses on world literature, trauma fiction, and Arab American literature.

The study has several limitations. It is limited to two novels, which means that the findings may not be generalizable to all Arab American fiction. It focuses primarily on formal and thematic analysis and does not engage in empirical reader-response research. It also does not address the reception of the novels in different cultural contexts. Future research could extend this study by examining other Arab American novels, such as those by Randa Jarrar, Susan Muaddi Darraj, and Laila Lalami, to see whether similar formal strategies are employed. It could also examine the reception of these novels among different readerships, including Arab diaspora communities and non-Arab readers. Finally, it could explore the pedagogical implications of teaching these novels in courses on trauma fiction and world literature.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Kharazmi University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Funding

The authors did (not) receive support from any organization for the submitted work.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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