



ISSN: 1812-0512 (Print) 2790-346X (online)

Wasit Journal for Human Sciences

Available online at: <https://wjfh.uowasit.edu.iq>

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Keywords:

trauma, memory, identity,
cultural context, personal
anguish

Article history:

Received: 2024-11-28

Accepted: 2025-01-16

Available online: 2025-02-01



Exploring Cultural and Personal Trauma in Heather Raffo's Play Noura

ABSTRACT

The paper delves into the examination of trauma portrayals in Heather Raffo's "Noura" (2019). Raffo examines the challenges faced by two Iraqi women, Raffo and Maryam, in relation to parenthood following the capture of Iraq by "ISIS". The paper is concerned with the various depictions of trauma that Raffo accomplishes in the text then delves in the way she cocooned her characters' identity in order to recover their traumas. Initially, Noura is a trauma tale, illustrating the recurrent and repetitive nature of trauma from mother to daughter. The narrative reflects the interactions and dynamics between the mother and daughter and their function as substitutes for memory and recounting personal narratives. Moreover, examining the capture of Mosul by "ISIS" highlights Noura's account as a portrayal of historical trauma. Subsequently, Noura is analyzed via the lens of cultural trauma, shedding light on the several personas that Raffo adopts throughout the story. As each character has their own unique perspective on how the fall of Iraq affected their life, Raffo has used a variety of identities to show how trauma can take many forms depending on cultural context. The personal anguish portrayed by Raffo, as well as her own connection to both Iraqi and American identity, which is explored through the main character and the storyline, is also revealed. This analysis sheds light on the experiences of Iraqi women in America, highlighting how their cultural affinity with these stories serves as a catalyst for creative expression.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol21.Iss1/Pt1.816>

استكشاف الصدمة الثقافية والشخصية في مسرحية نورا لهيذر راف

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المستخلص

يتعمق البحث في فحص تصوير الصدمة في مسرحية نورا لهيذر رافو (2019). تدرس رافو التحديات التي تواجهها امرأتان عراقيتان، رافو ومريم، فيما يتعلق بالأبوة بعد استيلاء داعش على العراق. يهتم البحث بالتصورات المختلفة للصدمة التي حققتها رافو في النص، ثم يتعمق في الطريقة التي غطت بها هوية شخصياتها من أجل تجاوز صدماتهم أولاً، نورا هي قصة صدمة، توضح الطبيعة المتكررة والمتكررة للصدمة من الأم إلى ابنتها. تعكس الرواية طرق التواصل والتفاعل بين الأم وابنتها ووظيفتهما كبدايل للذاكرة وسرد الحكايات الشخصية. علاوة على ذلك، فإن تناول موضوع استيلاء داعش على الموصل يسلط الضوء على رواية نورا كتصوير لصدمة تاريخية. بعد ذلك، يتم تحليل نورا من خلال عدسة الصدمة الثقافية؛ مما يلقي الضوء على العديد من الأشخاص الذين تتبناهم رافو طوال القصة. ولما كانت كل شخصية لها منظورها الفريد حول كيفية تأثير سقوط نظام الحكم في العراق على حياتها، فقد استخدمت رافو مجموعة متنوعة من الهويات لإظهار كيف يمكن للصدمة أن تتخذ أشكالاً عديدة اعتماداً على السياق الثقافي. كما تم الكشف عن الألم الشخصي الذي تصوره رافو، فضلاً عن ارتباطها بالهوية العراقية والأمريكية، والذي تم استكشافه من خلال الشخصية الرئيسية وقصة القصة. يلقي هذا التحليل الضوء على تجارب النساء العراقيات في أمريكا، مسلطاً الضوء على كيفية تفاعل خلفياتهن الثقافية مع هذه القصص كمحفز للتعبير الإبداعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، الذاكرة، الهوية، السياق الثقافي، المعاناة الشخصية.

1.1 Introduction to Heather Raffo's *Noura*

In the days leading up to Christmas, Noura, Tareq, and their son Yazen all get in the holiday spirit. The Christian families in Iraq have just immigrated to the United States and adopted Americanized names like Nora, Tim, and Alex. Maryam, a young Iraqi woman from Mosul, is the secret biological daughter of Noura and Tareq, whom Noura has supported. Maryam is result of an extramarital affair between Noura and Tareq while living in Mosul before the 2003 Warfare and the War on terrorism. Overwhelmed by the feeling of shame due to the social conventions, Noura is forced to hide the secret of her pregnancy from Tareq and her family. She left Maryam in an orphanage under Sister Rana's custody,; the latter is "Noura's aunt and Maryam's surrogate mother". Noura kept that secret for twenty-six years till she unfolded it at the end of the play to her husband. Maryam and Noura's childhood friend Rafa'a (an Iraqi Muslim) are anticipated to join the family for the holiday celebration. When Maryam, who is six months pregnant at the time, unexpectedly shows up, she tells Noura that she decided to have a baby child rather than a husband (Raffo, 2019, p.23). Noura's mixed feelings about: "motherhood", "Iraq", "moving to the US", and all that she gave up in the process are exacerbated by her presence and the background fall of "Iraq to ISIS".

1.2 Heather Raffo's Biography

"Heather Raffo, an Iraqi-American playwright and actor", is renowned for her affecting storytelling that revolves on Iraq and the unique depiction of Iraqi women. Raffo's work has met widespread approval, and she is a member of an emerging cohort of female playwrights and actors from the "Middle East and North Africa (MENA)" region who "proudly embrace their ethnic, cultural, and religious" backgrounds and identities. Raffo has received numerous invitations to deliver speeches to theatre professionals and practitioners, as well as to the wider community seeking to promote fairness and harmony for individuals with marginalized identities, especially those within the broader MENA diaspora (Elnaggar, 2022, p.11). Raffo has regularly engaged in artistic collaborations with various theatre artists from the "MENA region". She frequently incorporates trauma, particularly trauma associated with the "MENA identity" and experience, as a central

motif in her dramatic storytelling. Raffo's influence has transcended the realm of theatre, as evidenced by the reaction of readers who are motivated to empower a fresh cohort of women to express their personal experiences, observations, and identities through writing. Raffo initially embarked on her theatrical journey as an actress, but has since gained recognition for her theatrical works that center around Iraq and the lives of Iraqis. (Elnaggar, 2022, p. 11)

Heather Raffo descends from Lansing, Michigan, and was born to an American mother and an Iraqi father (Raffo Bio). Raffo has a strong connection to her Iraqi origin, although she did not learn Arabic while growing up and did not have any involvement with an extended "Arab or "Arab-American" community during her youth. Nevertheless, she experienced a strong sense of affinity with her Iraqi heritage due to her familial ties. In her own residence, she indulged in Arabic melodies, consumed customary cuisine, and received visits from Iraqi relatives, all of which fostered a strong connection to her cultural roots and to Iraq "*Fallujah: The Opera*". Raffo embarked on a single journey to Iraq during her early years alongside her family, specifically in 1974, when she was at four years of age. Subsequently, she reminisced on her early years visit to Baghdad, describing it as "magical" (Raffo, 2021)

Raffo employs several experimental tactics, such as the concept of dream, the change between the past and present, disintegration, and symbolism, to dramatize history through memory. Raffo consistently and emphatically conveys her intense response to the situation in Iraq from the early 1990s forward through the bulk of her characters. She declares:

"Oh, I'm not just from Michigan—I'm living in Michigan with a big family in Iraq. I'm not on one side of this war. I can't sit in a bar with people cheering as bombs are going off. My body, blood and psyche want my family to live. What if I never see them again? What if they're just in the wrong place in the wrong time? (Renner, 2005, p.1)"

2003 Warfare exposes individuals to several distressing scenes. The occupation and aftermath of the sectarian war have caused a devastating damage to the social cohesion of Iraqi society, giving rise to a new distressing discourse centered on bombings and

massacres. Adhraa Abdul Hussein Naser also emphasizes the role of “Media is the soft power the US used to support its operations in Iraq during and after the war” (Naser, 2022, p.24). Raffo discloses that due to her Iraqi heritage, she intimately relates to the collective anguish experienced by Iraqis. Despite residing in America, a considerable distance from Iraq, she remains deeply impacted by the ongoing war. Consequently, she assumes a sense of duty to articulate the profound sorrow endured by the Iraqi people. (Abdelhameed, 2023, p.55)

The War on terrorism has resulted in the development of a body of literature that imitates the individual and collective responses to war-based trauma. The literature of this horrific conflict consists of testimonial tales that offer readers genuine insight and a thorough understanding of the overpowering event as it was truly encountered and witnessed by both civilians and soldiers. (Cockley, 1969, p.50) During her interview with Riz Khan, Raffo highlights that Noura serves as a representation of herself, along with other Iraqi American women she encountered. Furthermore, the play includes scenes where she vividly depicts real events she personally experienced during the Iraq war, as they were being reported on television:

“I don't even know
hundreds of thousands?
How many Iraqis?
And
a woman actually turned to me
and said that
she said
“the war it's all so heartbreaking”
she was getting a pedicure.
I was getting a fucking pedicure.
I walk
I can't walk
down

the street

I want

New York to stop.

Why don't we count the number of Iraqis dead?

Why? (Qtd in Al Shammari, 2016, 145-146)”

1.3 Theatrical Framework of *Noura*

To illustrate how the traumatic experiences of the characters are revealed, the use of variety of influential dramatic techniques, such as non-linear storytelling, symbolism, intense character development, nostalgia and scenes in which the parameters between the past and present are blurred will be examined. Literary trauma studies will be used as a prism, through which to examine the play; theoretical frameworks developed by “Cathy Caruth, Dominic la Capra, Judith Herman, and Bessel van der Kolk,” will be applied.

In *Noura* play; trauma, whether personal or cultural, is depicted through powerful monologues, flashback sequences and symbolism, allowing the readers to empathize with the characters’ emotional struggles. Plays like Raffo's “*Noura*” are examples of testimonial narratives; these works are characterized by their use of techniques for remembering, recording, and making sense of the traumatic incidents that occurred outside of conflict. They present the opportunity to acknowledge the “legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience [by acknowledging] the paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival.” (Caruth, 1016, p. 58) They face the challenge, as Caruth puts it, “of how not to betray the past” (Caruth, 1016, p. 27) through the medium of historiography, investigating how familiarity with the past might shed light on the present.

The characters in the play repeatedly experience traumatic events. The play proposes two methods for healing. The first method, as described by LaCapra (2001), is known as “working through.” This involves the traumatized individuals creating emotional distance from the trauma and perceiving it as a past event. LaCapra argues that “acting-out” of trauma in which “tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving

the traumatic scene” (LaCapra, 2001, p.21) should not be the exclusive method of achieving healing.

The author highlights the need of "working through" as a means for individuals who have experienced trauma to differentiate between past and present, and to remember that something occurred to them or their community in the past, while also recognizing that they are currently living in the present with opportunities for the future. (LaCapra, 2001, p.22) Regarding this matter, the process of "working through" will not result in a complete resolution, complete understanding, complete healing, or complete control over the trauma. Instead, it will supplement the stage of expressing one's emotions and behaviors related to the trauma and aid in the change of the individual from being a "victim" to being a "survivor and active participant in society." (LaCapra, 2001, p.xi) By applying LaCapra perspective to the play, it becomes evident that characters have the ability to recover and find solace when they make the conscious choice to liberate themselves from the ceaseless cycle of revisiting past events. Noura tells Rafa'a in "*Noura*": "In letting go of the burden of silence — you open a door. Or maybe you close a door. Either way it's a place from which you never return" (Raffo, 2019, p. 43)

The play's second recommended method of recovery is getting therapeutic atmosphere in a fresh, secure setting far from their homes, which continuously bring up terrible memories for the characters. According to Bloom (1999), trauma survivors need a fresh, safe space in order to recuperate and get over their wounds. Combining the two healing modalities, the harmed characters' recuperation will occur once they choose to be, as Judith Herman (1992) asserts, "the author or arbiter of [their] own recovery." (Herman, 1997, p.133) This is because healing "is based on the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. ... In [the] renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by traumatic experiences ...such as trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy." (Herman, 1997, p.13) In this study the fresh, safe space is referred to as cocooning in which the survivors recover their wounds and establish new and healthy perspectives of life again.

1.4 Heather Raffo's *Noura* as an Aesthetic Interpreter

The play delves into the nuanced ways different characters navigate and cope with their cultural trauma such as struggles with displacement, loss of heritage, and the challenges of reconciling cultural traditions and of assimilation into new culture. By focusing on the lives of Iraqi and Iraqi-American women in *Noura*, Raffo presents a portrait of the "Iraqi woman" who is a composite of numerous stories marked by trauma and triumph. Raffo demonstrates in her writing that being an Iraqi (or MENA) woman may take many forms:

“The one-person version [of the play, in which all the characters were portrayed by Raffo herself] really spoke to the fact that Iraqis were not only on one side of any issue - they were all individually torn between many conflicting feelings. Performing it as a solo show felt like performing a civil war. It was exhausting in a deep and profound way. Also, it showed the audience how many different voices lived inside each person. How complex we all are. (Interview by Riz, 2007)”

Raffo emphasizes a common challenge encountered by numerous children of immigrants, elucidating how they and their parents navigate the contrast between the cultural customs of their country of origin and those of the country they have relocated to. Raffo is classified as a "Third Culture Kid," a term coined by David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken. This term refers to individuals who have spent a substantial portion of their formative years in a culture different from that of their parents. These individuals develop connections to multiple cultures, but do not fully identify with any single culture. (Pollock, 1999, p.19) Third Culture Kids frequently bear the responsibility of elucidating the immigrant encounter to communities who are not immigrants. They are often required to assume the roles of their parents in both their original nation and their new one. Pollock asserts:

“Second-generation citizens are uniquely positioned to be agents of intercultural communication and exchange, as (at least in theory) they are acknowledged as reliable informants and translators by both natives and migrants. They are also uniquely capable of transforming adopted homelands into ‘diaspora spaces’. (Pollock, 1999, p.19)”

Raffo assumes the role of a cultural intermediary between the Western world and Iraq through her plays. She draws from her personal experiences, incorporating them into her plays. Raffo's artistic endeavors are largely influenced by her cultural connection to Iraq and the emotional distress resulting from being the child of an immigrant. Her move from actor to playwright is driven by her identity as an "Iraqi-American" and her experiences inside the predominantly white theatre profession in the United States and England. Noura's desire to love perfectly in the present moment before potential separation suggests an underlying hope for meaningful connections and a brighter future:

"NOURA. Can it all be spoken?

It took so long to get here.

How many wars? Continents?

I was thinking I had to come to it whole - I didn't

we come with what we carry

and it's constructed, salvaged

with what's here, with what's given

this Christmas table

is the fruit of generations of keeping alive

not just the food, it's you, your child, our child.

Did it take Mosul being destroyed

to find each other at this table?

Could we have gotten here any other way?

Our survival here is stifling

walls, constant concrete - but we were blown open –

and if you stay in the emptiness just enough

a pattern comes

tangled with the old, but new, new urban tissue

a new pattern of life

....

I fight for what's left. (Raffo, 2019, p.60)"

The lines appear to be dramatic monologue reflecting on the complexities of life, identity, and the human experience. Noura contemplates the significance of the Christmas table, connecting it to generations, survival, and the impact of war, particularly mentioning Mosul's destruction. The struggle for survival, the conflict between preserving life and losing oneself in the process, and the desire for connection are central themes. Noura expresses a need to pause, appreciate, and love fully in the present moment before potential separation or displacement occurs again. The interruption by Yazen adds a layer of immediacy and familial connection to the reflection. Yet, there is a sense of hope embedded in the text. Despite the challenges, destruction, and struggles faced, there is a belief in the possibility of renewal and the birth of something new. The reference to Christmas, the darkest day of the year for those displaced and immigrant people, carries a symbolic meaning of hope and the potential for positive change.

Noura's story delves into the convergence of maternity, national and gender identification, and migration. Maryam proclaims: "I can question how we love. Why are we called mother"? (Raffo, 2019, p. 58) Noura then conveys to Maryam a deep appreciation for the transformative power of childbirth, framing it as a natural and essential part of the journey into motherhood stating that:

"Birth is the most powerful pain. The only pain you are meant to feel. It is a pain you are equipped for. You are designed for. Do not try to dull it. Feel everything. Remember everything. Hear me; giving birth was my most intense joy. It's your whole body preparing you for every minute of motherhood. (TAREQ gets up from the table) (Raffo, 2019, p.62)"

Noura expresses a sense of empowerment and joy in the midst of this intense experience. By urging Maryam to feel everything and remember everything, she is encouraging an acknowledgment and acceptance of the full range of emotions associated with childbirth. The notion that giving birth was Noura's "most intense joy" adds a layer of positivity and celebration to the otherwise challenging and painful experience. There is a sense of hope in Noura's words. Despite describing the intense pain of childbirth, she frames it as a powerful and purposeful experience, suggesting that it equips women for the challenges

and joys of motherhood. The emphasis on feeling everything and remembering everything implies an appreciation for the depth and richness of the human experience, even in moments of pain. The idea that giving birth was Noura's "most intense joy" further underscores a positive and hopeful perspective on the transformative nature of childbirth. Overall, there's an implicit optimism in Noura's words, celebrating the resilience and inherent strength found in the experience of bringing new life into the world. Indirectly, this process of giving birth alludes to the process of cocooning identity in which a traumatized person come out finally with more resilience inheriting recovered identity. Both methods of recovery can be applied here: Dominic LaCapra's concept of working through is present when Noura does not silence her painful experience and accepts the full range of emotion associated with childbirth. She willingly finds harbor for her deep and the strongest subscriptions and transforms them into hope. The pain of giving birth is turned into celebration of empowerment and positivity. The idea of home is given differently in *Noura* "home is found wherever you have ones around you." For Raffo, *Noura* becomes the study of home and community across limits of identity. Raffo, during an interview with Ahmed Tharwhat on "BelAhdan," discusses *Noura* and expresses the idea that home is mostly defined by the people one is surrounded by, rather than the physical location. She claims that as a mother, she has never experienced such a strong sense of stability and connection to reality. "Home is defined by the presence of my children". (Tharwhat in a conversation with Raffo, 2020)

1.5 Personating Trauma in Raffo's *Noura*

In "*Noura*", every character contemplates the act of reflecting on their past, letting go of the weight of silence, and expressing their pain and personal experiences. Throughout the story, several individuals face difficulties in revealing hidden truths, as they fear the uncertain consequences that would ensue from that disclosure. "Noura" is apprehensive about disclosing to Tareq and Maryam that they are Maryam's biological parents. "Noura" relinquished Maryam at an orphanage in Iraq while she was unmarried. Maryam withholds information about her life in the United States from "Noura" and only discloses her pregnancy when she is physically present at Noura's residence. Rafa'a grapples with

articulating his affection for “Noura”, his companion from infancy, despite the fact that the opportunity for their love to flourish has long since elapsed. “Noura” and Tareq are reluctant to inform Yazen about the brutality in Iraq, detailing the profound destruction caused by ISIS in their former residence. Every grown-up grapples with the memories they left behind in Iraq and struggles to articulate their emotions as they forge new identities in the United States. In the opening of the play, Raffo establishes that each character has adopted an American name on their recently obtained documents. “Noura” is now referred to as Nora, Tareq as Tim, and Yazen as Alex. Raffo mentions in the notes at the end of her text that “Sometimes characters are referred to by their Iraqi names, sometimes by the names they took when immigrating to America.” (Raffo, Author’s Notes).

The play consists of thirteen scenes; scene seven, eight, nine, and ten carry the climax in which the characters open wide all their wounds and unfold their traumatic experiences. The opening scene finds Noura standing outdoors in the cold atmosphere. The hymns of Hail Marys can be heard in Arabic in the background. Noura fells the chilly atmosphere, states that “On the coldest day in Mosul. Blessed Mother, you came like a friend” (Raffo, 2019, p.7). Tareq abruptly disrupts her contemplation, and the story then transitions to Scene Two, which takes place inside her apartment. Tareq desires that the entire family adopts American names for their new passports. Noura’s passport now has the name “Nora” as a tribute to Ibsen. However, she adamantly refuses to be addressed by that name, leading to a dispute between the pair “You changed my name against my will - call me by my real name.” (Raffo, 2019, p.8)

Tareq and Noura engage in a conversation about their Christmas preparations, including deliberating on the games they intend to get for their son. The discussion shifts to Maryam, a refugee from Mosul whom they have been supporting in her immigration process. She is expected to arrive imminently at their residence. Tareq informs Noura that Maryam is not a member of their family, and the sequence concludes:

“TAREQ. This generation, they're hard, they're refugees.

I just want to prepare / you

NOURA. We're refugees.

TAREQ. She's not family. (Raffo, 2019, p.10)”

It is important to take into account both Caruth's focus on the traumatic experience itself and on unconscious repeats (Caruth *Unclaimed Experience* 11–12). Most trauma theorists believe that the initial traumatic incident is a unique experience that becomes cyclic and repeating through unconscious repetitions like dreams and nightmares and other psychological symptoms. Even though Raffo presents the trauma-event and its repetitions inside *Noura*, it's apparent that the act of composing *Noura* itself is a conscious repetition of the trauma of losing homeland for Raffo and her family:

“When ISIS overtook Mosul in 2014, many Christians felt Iraq was simply no longer a place they would belong. I had almost 100 family members in Iraq at the start of the 2003 war; I now have just two cousins living there. In the last decade my family has scattered across the world. I am now left to connect to Iraq on my own, through the many artists and students with whom I have met and collaborated. But not through my grandmother's house, or through my grandfather's churches. Not through a vast network of cousins or a community, because it no longer exists. And it may never come back. (Raffo, 2019, p.80–81)”

The proceeding scenes tackle the events after the arrival of Rafa'a, a close family friend and Muslim from Iraq who will be spending Christmas with the family. Rafa'a is originally from the homeland of Noura, but he had to leave Iraq because of the war and because of the stigma attached to his chosen career as an obstetrician in the more unstable post-war Iraq. Secretly, he gives Yazan and Tareq a hard drive that will be Noura's Christmas present from Yazan, hidden in a locket necklace. He had a contact in Iraq take pictures of every book in Noura's home there, including the one with the picture of her mother hidden inside. Tareq and Rafa'a then explains:

“TAREQ. Noura's been talking about her library for more than a decade!

RAFAA. Wait until you see the picture of her mother he found stuck in a book. Mashallah (Raffo, 2019, p. 11)”

Noura's arrival prompts a discussion on the building blueprints lying around the house and the table. She informs Tareq that she's thinking about going back to work as an architect after he nags her about the mess. Moreover, she adds about her love for books and future plans:

“My desk is in my mind. I have organization you cannot see. (She prays.) "Blessed God, thank you that we even have food, if we eat off books, it's more than millions of refugees have, make us grateful lord. Amen."

“RAFAA. (To himself.) Bismullah. Il rahman al rahim (Raffo, 2019, p.13)”

Several traumatic events, all of which have direct bearing on Noura, occur early in the play: Noura abandoning Maryam at an orphanage, Noura and Tareq fleeing Iraq, the further dissolution of Iraq after their departure, and Noura's relationships with her mother and other characters (such as Sister Rana, who is Noura's aunt and Maryam's surrogate mother). The first, Noura's emotional refusal to abandon Maryam, is the play's main conflict. Because of her inability to recover from this traumatic experience, Noura has taken on the role of Maryam's sponsor, paving the route for Maryam to enter the United States legally and even asking her to spend Christmas Eve at her home. By telling her story to Maryam, and then to Tareq and Yazen, it appears that Noura is trying to relieve the emotional and psychological strain caused by the traumatic experience. Since *Noura* is firmly rooted in reality, we don't witness her hallucinations, dreams, or even her desire to construct the ideal home. Maryam will see the blueprints on her next visit:

“MARYAM. What are you working on? The drawings?

NOURA. Oh, it's a house, for Tareq. You can open them - it's a fantasy. For his family. To live all together, like the old houses, with a garden in the middle. He wants apartments for his five sisters; they all have kids, it'd be impossible to build. (Raffo, 2019, p.21)”

Noura is trying to reconcile her Iraqi heritage with her new life in the United States through the "construction" of her ideal home in her imagination. She successfully built up her cocoon and passes the test of trauma. Raffo discusses this fantasy home through

Noura claiming that it is “in *Noura*’s imagination. Or how it holds her memories of Mosul, Christmas dinners, a table full of family (Raffo dx)

In fact, *Noura*’s infatuation in drawings helps to construct her cocoon-like shelter where she can attain her piece of mind and heal her past emotional wounds. It is her safe zone in which she recalls her lost identity. It is where the present reconcile with the past. *Noura* creates a middle space between her dreams and reality. Cocooning her pain and fears in the world of architectural sketches helps her to construct an alternative homeland and a healthier and true identity. This phenomenon can be described as compulsory recurrence of traumatic experiences, sometimes referred to as a "dream." *Noura* feels a strong want to construct an improved version of reality in order to alleviate the mental burden caused by the loss of her home country, Iraq. The emotional distress caused by leaving *Maryam* is closely connected to *Noura*'s bond with her own mother, reflecting the repetitive pattern of trauma. The text portrays a recurring cycle of trauma experienced by mothers and daughters. This is exemplified by the two presents in *Noura*'s possession - her mother's locket and the hard drive acquired by *Yazen* for *Noura*, which he also encloses in a jewelry-like box.

Soon, that glimpse of hope is turned to an environment of disappointment between *Noura* and *Maryam*, when the latter receives strong criticism from *Noura* after discovering *Maryam*’s pregnancy. *Maryam* immediately justifies her free manners by saying "I don't have to explain to you. Da'esh, when you see them face to face. I'm an orphan; I want someone of my own." (Raffo, 2019, p. 23) *Noura* holds the belief that by presenting *Maryam* with the locket and recounting her grandmother's narrative, she will potentially attain solace, or at the very least, closure, for the dual distresses of relinquishing her daughter and enduring the loss of her mother. *Maryam* initially refuses to accept the necklace due to her lack of comprehension regarding its significance. Subsequently, she rejects the memory of *Noura*, which the necklace symbolizes, as it is not a shared experience between *Maryam* and *Noura*'s mother. Nevertheless, it indicates a room for hope for a new beginning after speaking out and sharing their traumas loudly in a safe

space called the cocoon. All traumatized characters would never be the same after these seemingly peaceful confrontations and discoveries.

Consequently, Rafa'a helps Maryam to delve deep in her subconscious and get rid of her superficiality. Upon discussing Maryam pregnancy, he tells her that she is not acting faithfully first as a mother, and second as a Christian: "It might be good for both of you to sit with a young Iraqi refugee over Christmas. I can't think of anything more 'Christmassy' Welcoming into your home a pregnant woman who has no place to go" (Raffo, 2019, p.28).

Heather Raffo's *Noura* follows conventional narrative structure; it pays close attention to its characters' connections to Iraq. The bond between mother and daughter lies at the heart of Raffo's story in *Noura*. The closeness of Noura and Maryam (and Yazen, too) as mothers is reminiscent of a person's loyalty to his or her homeland; in this case, Iraq. Raffo shows the readers thoughtfully the characters' complex webs of ties to the country of their birth. In her play *Noura*, Raffo addresses the widespread effects of Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiments on MENA immigrant groups, in addition to Raffo's focus on motherhood and motherland. In addition to being the tale of an Iraqi family who has recently immigrated to the United States as citizens, *Noura* is a story that focuses intently on the anguish of motherhood in, and the need to flee from, war zones. Raffo's *Noura* is preoccupied with what the author calls a "sacrament of exile" and how it relates to themes of remembrance, loss, and pain (Samari, 2016).

Later on, Noura faces other challenges with her husband Tareq who wants to have another child in his family and Yazen who wants his mother to share with him his infatuation to PlayStation. Yazen expresses his boredom of staying three hours in church for Christmas unlike Noura who believes that keeping these ceremonies is part of keeping the identity. She dresses him as Chaldean King. Even in Scene Eight at Midnight Mass, Yazen feels the difference between the American hobbits in Christmas Eve and how his mother behaves in that occasion. She is different even from her Baghdadi husband being Christian from Mosul:

"NOURA. To break your fast, you need meat.

YAZEN. Jesus mom! Nobody fasts on Christmas eve! Can't you be American for once?! (Raffo, 2019, p.37)"

It is Noura's way to cocoon herself away from her homeland. She tries to bring the atmosphere of Christmas in Mosul city to America. She tries to prepare the same dishes that are used to be cooked in her Homeland and brings them to America even if they look out of place and unusual. She believes that America is a free country where people can practice their religious ceremonies without fear. Noura not only keeps her Iraqi food and Christmas traditions, but she also keeps her Iraqi moral traditions as well. She tells Rafa'a about her embarrassment about Maryam's pregnancy claiming that "She was raised by the most courageous nuns, for god sakes. They defended her with their life. How could she be so proud? Like she owes nobody. She has no right to behave this way. I paid for her to come" (Raffo, 2019, p.38)

It is evident that the trauma is not only characterized by a recurring and repeating nature, but it is also intricately interconnected and mutually reliant. One of the rare resolutions arises when Noura informs Yazen, "Alex! There's something you need to know." (Raffo, 2019, p.78) She ultimately acknowledges that he embodies both Alex and Yazen to some extent. Furthermore, Noura may have come to the realization that it is Yazen, rather than Maryam, to whom she must disclose her concealed reality. In recounting the story and assigning the name Alex to him, she must recognize the extent to which she and her family have undergone transformation. Obviously, the traumatized persons undergo the process of cocooning and witness healthy recovery. The act of identifying him as Alex symbolizes her acceptance that their future lays in the United States as American citizens. While Noura initiates her journey towards acceptance by referring to Yazen as Alex, she also concludes the play with the statement, "I am uncertain about how to simultaneously release and retain." (Raffo, 2019, p.78) That shows her fragmented and unsettled idea that represents trauma.

Conclusions

Heather Raffo's play show a profound sense of bitterness and insecurity, Most Iraqi woman tolerate and they still endure today, both inside and outside Iraq. Raffo is an Iraqi

American woman who is torn between her two countries. She extended between two completely opposing conventions and traditions in spite of being an American. She still feels affected by the harmful consequences of war in Iraq. This is the real cause of her sense about being responsible to expose the hardships inflicted on Iraqi people Raffo aims to cocoon her characters with a shelter like atmosphere in order to sustain peace and get over their many traumas. She points many techniques in her play to resist the consequences of a traumatic experience. She suggests that keeping her original name would remind her about her homeland. She never like her husband and anxiety to change their name; she insists on cooking the same traditional dishes as she used to do in Mosul; the traditional costumes in Mosul also brings her joy and glory; being an artist (architect) relieves her soul from the burden of estrangement in the diaspora; material memoir of her mother are what connects her to the past. She tries to keep that connection and preserve these memoirs; the presence of her faithful friend Rafa'a represents a spiritual safe space which keeps her from falling apart due to her many traumas. He helped her to change her gloomy perspectives from being simply a victim for trauma to a survivor.

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