The Liminal Space between Imprisonment and Freedom: Trauma in Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell*

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Abstract

This paper aims to study *The Shell* (2008) by the Syrian writer Mustafa Khalifa. It analyzes the physical as well as the psychological trauma suffered by the protagonist Musa, who was imprisoned for fourteen years without knowing the cause of his imprisonment. After studying film in Paris, a Catholic student Musa returns to his homeland, Syria, and upon landing at the airport, he is unjustly arrested. He is mistaken for a radical Islamist and is imprisoned with detainees who were either with or suspected of being affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. He is locked up without trial in Tadmur under Bashar al-Assad's regime. Tadmur has been called the "absolute prison" by dissident Yassin al-Haj Salih and the "kingdom of death and madness" by Syrian poet Faraj Bayraqdar. Musa remains oblivious to the crime he has been charged with until just before his impending release. From the very beginning, his life is endangered not only by the harshness of daily torture and humiliation but also by the Islamist extremists in his confinement who deem him deserving of execution as an unbeliever due to his Catholic faith. He faces exclusion because others perceive him as impure. This isolation is enforced not just by the jailers but also by his fellow prisoners, mirroring the suppression experienced by several political detainees who made their way through Tadmur and other prisons in Syria and were unable to share their suffering. The paper argues that Musa is trapped in a liminal space, that is, he is physically released but has never truly been released, and thus is a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) suffering emotional numbing.

Keywords: Trauma, PTSD, imprisonment, torture, witness

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Tadmur, the military prison, which was located in the desert near Palmyra, was originally erected by the authorities of the French Mandate. The horrifying circumstances of torment, random execution, and regular deprivation experienced by the prisoners in Tadmur raise the question of penetrating inspection by local and international human rights organizations until the shutting down of this detention center. Faraj Bayraqdar, the Syrian poet, called this military prison a "kingdom of death and madness" (qtd. in Taleghani 21). Dissident Yassin al-Haj Salih considered it an "absolute prison" (21). Amnesty International reported it as "synonymous with brutality, despair and dehumanization" (1). Applying the theoretical framework of trauma, this paper explores physical as well as psychological trauma endured by Musa, the protagonist, and other prisoners in Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell* (2017). For several decades, they endured imprisonment without trial in Tadmur. The paper argues that Musa, who lost his identity during his imprisonment, is trapped in a liminal space, and thus is a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) suffering from emotional numbing.

Several detainees have written about the tormenting memoirs of their imprisonment. Muhammad Salim Hammad's *Tadmur: Shahidwa-Mashhud* (1988), a prison memoir, is about a prisoner suspected of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and recounts the suffering and torments he faced at the detention center. The prison memoir of Faraj Bayraqdar, *Khiyanat al-Lughawa al-Samt* (*The Betrayals of Language and Silence*), published in 2006, includes a chapter titled "Tadmuriat" that explores the fear-provoking moments he experienced during his time in prison. For more than four decades, the Assad regime has imposed silence, and these works focused on the trauma of imprisonment in Tadmur. Yasin al-Hajj Salih, who was imprisoned for sixteen years, calls Tadmur "just a closed place that doesn't open up except [for one] to receive food … and punishment. That is Tadmor prison: the Syrian shame that is indelible. In this prison, time does not pass. It accumulates over the prisoners and suffocates them" (22). The Human Rights Watch Organization has published several reports condemning the torture and abuses occurring in the prison. In a report from 1996, they noted that "Tadmor is infamous throughout Syria not only for its harsh conditions but also for the depredations against civilian political prisoners that have occurred within its walls since 1980, such as torture and summary executions" (qtd. in İnanç). Additionally, a 2001 report by Amnesty International on Tadmur stated that "political suspects have most frequently been tortured during the initial period following arrest while being held in incommunicado detention in prisons and detention centers throughout Syria. Torture has been used as a means of extracting information and also as a form of punishment" (qtd. in İnanç). Tadmur is elucidated by al-Bara' al-Sarraj

as a "symphony of fear" (qtd. in Hilleary 1) which makes it difficult for the detainees to reveal the truth about their horrifying experience as it may lead them once again to the prison.

The autobiography, *Khiyanat al-Lughawa al-Samt* (*The Betrayals of Language and Silence*) published in 2006 by Faraj Bayraqdar depicted his detention at the center of interrogation and in the prisons of Saydnaya and Tadmur, where he was consistently tortured for fourteen years. He also recounted the bitter experiences faced by his inmates. He did not share his memories chronologically but rather with fragmented scenes and momentary anecdotes. At the beginning of the chapter titled "To the East," he reminisces that they were expecting that they would not be shifted to Tadmur, but their expectation went in vain when they found themselves in there as an additional punishment. Upon their arrival, they started the journey of suffering. Bayraqdar describes his harsh "reception" and "hospitality" of the prison personnel, employing euphemisms specific to Tadmur and other Syrian jails. In the chapter titled "Circles of Continuous Inhalation," he recounted how he was horrified after witnessing the assassination of prisoners in the corridor. They were frequently subjected to torture and fatal beatings at the hands of the guardians. It could be anyone's turn. Bayraqdar considered it "the breather in the courtyard is a true cutting off of breath, and sometimes a final cutting off of breath" (qtd. in Taleghani 23). The terrifying sound of the blows alert that one more prisoner was going to die. This chapter ended when a guard forced a prisoner to swallow a mouse. Despite having survived, he deteriorated mentally and his sanity was lost. In the last chapter titled "Tadmoriyat: Beyond Surrealism," Bayraqdar represents the horror in both prose and poetry:

> *High walls of stubborn cold cement…*
> *Observation towers…*
> *Barriers and checkpoints…*
> *Fortifications and highly trained military units…*
> *And finally … surrounded by lessons of pure, national fear…*
> *Even if all of Syria fell,*
> *Surely, it would be impossible for this prison to fall.* (qtd. in Taleghani 23)

With this, the poet arouses the link between terror and the physical elements of the prison and its vicinity.

Raymond Corsini states that trauma is "the result of a painful event, physical or mental, causing immediate damage to the body or shock to the mind" (qtd. in Swart 48). Sigmund Freud, in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), introduced the word "death" where he focused on how the traumatic experience

recurs by itself unknowingly or knowingly, and he called it "traumatic neurosis," an "unwished for repetition of trauma as a result of some risk to life" (18). Freud witnessed how the psychological disorder replicates the inevitable burden of past events in the mind. He observed that when the mind becomes fixated on an unpleasant reality, it results in the experience of terror, fright, and anxiety. Cathy Caruth denoted Paul de Man and Freud to theorize trauma and its delayed effects on the mind in her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. As defined by her, trauma is an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which response is delayed, uncontrolled and repetitive" (11). While describing certain characteristics of trauma, she mentions Freud: "Freud describes a pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals" (1). Caruth proved that Freud theorizes in his essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" that the mental wound is "the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (4) and it became the prime source of trauma. Healing is necessary for both the mind and body. Although the physical body may recuperate, the mind consistently fails to neutralize the compelling wound, and the mental disturbance of the survivor becomes a long-lasting component of their life. Both Caruth and Freud postulate that the traumatic experience is overpowered by the paradoxical, complex incomprehensibility of survival. By using the theoretical tools of Freud and Caruth for this study, this paper attempts to find the physical as well as psychological trauma suffered by the protagonist Musa and other prisoners in Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell*.

The word "liminal" derives from the Latin term "limen," signifying threshold. The phrase "liminal space" was initially introduced in the early 20th century by Arnold van Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage* (1960). A liminal space denotes the interval between "what was" and "what follows." It is a locus of transformation, a period of anticipation and uncertainty over the future. Richard Rohr characterizes this place as, "where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence" (qtd. in "Inaliminalspace"). Liminal space can evoke emotional turmoil, as they often need confronting difficult truths about oneself, addressing unresolved issues stemming from prior traumas, and navigating substantial losses and transformations. Lindsey Tong, Clinical Director of Profound Treatment in Los Angeles, articulated that "People feel overwhelmed and confused with their emotions raw and exposed …. The uncertainty and lack of direction can be anxiety-provoking, making you feel adrift" (qtd. in "Healthline"). Homi Bhabha characterizes liminality as an instance of a third space, a "fantastic location of cultural difference where new expressive cultural identities continually open out performatively to realign

the boundaries of class, of gender, … contingent upon the stubborn chunks of the incommensurable elements of past, totalized identity" (qtd. in Eimke 12). The in-between is a realm characterized by liminality, resulting in a blend of elements, hybridity, synthesis, and fusion.

Musa, a Catholic film student, in Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell*, is apprehended at the airport on April 20, following his repatriation from Paris, on the unfounded suspicion that he is an adherent of the Muslim Brothers. The Kafkaesque concept of incarceration or mistaken identity for uncertain reasons is instituted when this happens. Security forces forcibly drag him to the interrogation center, where the smell of torture and cruelty overwhelm him. It is "human torture" (Khalifa 5). The noise of shattering and screaming during the interrogation of other detainees shock him. He is frozen and numbed by the "scattering specks of blood and fragments of human flesh … the voice of a young man in pain … sounds, sounds" (Khalifa 5-6). He is shocked and in a state of disbelief. Lots of questions come to his mind regarding his current situation, but there is only one hope: it must have been a mistake by the authorities. He is neither aware of what they wanted from him nor the reason for his torture as it is impractical for him to belong to a Muslim Brotherhood – he is a Christian. Throughout his imprisonment of thirteen years, he is haunted and traumatized by not getting the answer to his questions: "Why did they put me here? Why did they bring me here?" (17); "What sort of world was this that I'd been shoved into? Was this just the beginning? And where would it lead?" (19-20); "Had they not yet resolved on my death?" (47). He cannot not sleep as these questions come to his mind naturally. He thinks about his family. His father and mother were expecting him to arrive home, but he had not yet done so. He questioned, "How would they be explaining my absence all this time? What had they done to find out where I was, where and why I had disappeared …?" (49). He questions the existence of God. He considers his current situation and the misfortune that had happened to him to be the best examples of the nonexistence of God.

Throughout the novel, physical as well as psychological trauma is apparent. The regime inflicts such horrendous and unbearable torment that the prisoners long for death. They pray to God for death: "Please God, let me die, spare me this torture" (Khalifa 34). Musa had been continuously afraid of military police, security services, beatings, pain, and death. But after going through near-death experiences and witnessing the deaths of fellow prisoners, Musa becomes like stone and starts lacking feelings and sentiment, "with no thoughts, no reactions. Total paralysis, total submission" (47). The regime deliberately tortures him by prolonging his life of terror and fear so that he would reveal the secrets of the Muslim Brotherhood. He is also disliked and traumatized by a few cell mates

who were extremists and considered that it is their duty to kill a Christian, whom they consider an unbeliever. "You wretch … you unbeliever, this is the end of you, you dog! … overflowing with hatred and malice, bursting with insistence and determination … sort of mental paralysis overtook me" (46).

The field court commissioner visits the prison twice a week by helicopter, as Tadmur Prison is in the desert and far away from the capital of Syria. The commissioner is there to sentence death. Prisoners term the helicopter "death or the angel of death" (Khalifa 77). The landing of the helicopter terrorizes them. Near the court, the party of torture starts as the job of the police to make them confess. The court decides their fates by taking less than a minute without issuing any verdict. The court was run on two competencies: it had the power to order the death penalty for as many as it wished and to continue the detention of the prisoner for as long as it wished. The Syrian regime had not bestowed any power on this court to set any innocent prisoner free.

One of the most traumatizing episodes involves an elderly prisoner who was incarcerated alongside his three sons. The captors subjected him to an unimaginable form of psychological torture: they forced him to choose one of his sons to be spared from execution. Torn and anguished, the elderly man ultimately chooses his youngest son as he is unmarried and in the "flower of his youth" (Khalifa 167). This heart-wrenching decision is made in the desperate hope that at least one of his children might survive. However, the depths of the captors' cruelty is revealed when the execution list is released. To the elderly man's utter shock and horror, his own name is omitted, but all three of his sons' names are included. The choice he was forced to make is a sadistic trick, designed to inflict maximum psychological torment. This deliberate act of cruelty leaves the father and the other prisoners in a state of deep consternation and despair. The atmosphere in the prison becomes palpably heavy with grief and trauma. The arbitrary and brutal nature of the punishment inflicted on the elderly man and his sons shatters the already fragile morale of the inmates. Witnessing such cruelty, the prisoners collectively mourn, their empathetic sobbing and weeping a testament to their shared pain and helplessness. The seventy-year-old father, devastated and confused, finds himself questioning the very existence of justice and the presence of a merciful God in such a world of relentless cruelty and suffering. This exemplifies the extreme psychological torture employed by the captors, showcasing the profound impact of arbitrary and senseless cruelty on the human spirit. It not only devastates the elderly father but also serves as a grim reminder to all the prisoners of the merciless nature of their captors, deepening their collective trauma and hopelessness. The seventy-year-old father is confused, devastated, and questions God:

> Why like this? …why do you let these evildoers wreak havoc with us, why? What will you say? Will you say that God may move slowly but is never neglectful? And will words like that bring back my children? O God! Are you happy that As'ad, my twenty-five-year-old, should be executed at the hands of these evildoers? Tell me, answer me, why are you silent … O God, if you had three sons and they were all going to be executed in a single moment, what would you do? Eh? Very well, just answer this small question, you, Lord of the worlds, are you with us or with these evildoers? (168-169)

All three sons are executed brutally, leaving the elderly father to endure indescribable suffering. The loss of his children, compounded by the cruel manipulation that led to their deaths, plunges him into a profound and inconsolable grief. This horrific incident resonates deeply within the prison, sparking a collective response among the inmates. In an act of defiance and solidarity, the inmates decide to hold an open prayer during the funeral, despite the severe risks involved. In the oppressive environment of the prison, the recitation of the Quran or any form of prayer is strictly forbidden and brutally punishable. Nevertheless, the prisoners choose to honor the memory of the deceased sons and support the devastated father through their shared faith. This act of collective prayer becomes a form of silent protest against the inhumanity of their captors, a way to reclaim a sense of dignity and spiritual solace in the face of relentless oppression. The open prayer is not just a religious act but a profound expression of their collective grief and a demonstration of their unbroken spirit. Despite the ever-present threat of brutal retribution, the prisoners find strength in their faith and each other, creating a moment of sacred communion amidst the darkness of their imprisonment.

The execution of the sons is inhuman, and one can sense the physical as well as psychological suffering of the old man and of the other cellmates who witness it. Witnessing this execution directly through a hole, Nasim is appalled and succumbs to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Day by day, his condition deteriorates. He prefers to stay alone and refuses to speak after being convinced by his cellmates. Whenever he opens his mouth, he would say, "Where do they bury the corpses of people who are killed … Would Sa'd, Sa'id and As'ad's bodies already have decomposed? … The worms must now be eating into flesh of the three brothers. Worms in the eyes, worms in the belly, worms in the mouth, worms coming out of the nostrils, worms, worms" (Khalifa 175). He stays in deep thought for about two months, and all Musa's efforts to bring his cellmates back to a normal meets with great failure. Anti-depressants are given to Nasim forcibly by the prison doctor to control his PTSD, but he is not the same person

as he used to be. Musa notices slight changes with deep significance in Nasim, as he loses the capacity for bewilderment. There is a fake smile that is constantly hanging on his face or a smile that is mixed with depression. He does not show any anger, even if something is done against his will. He either smiles a lot or asks philosophical questions: "What is the purpose of life? … Is it comprehensible that this life should have been created by God? What does God gain by creating a life like As'ad? God brought him into this life and he suffered a lot, then was executed. … He didn't even have enough time to prove whether he was a good or bad man!" (176).

Musa receives a surprise when he is transferred to another prison before his release. In the beginning, he is not directly tortured in that new prison, but the sounds of pain and suffering in that solitary prison are alarming and torture him psychologically. His nerves weaken gradually. He does not succeed in ignoring the screams of pleading and pain. In fact, it is easier for him to be in a situation of torture than to hear the sounds of screaming. He is asked the same question repeatedly: Which organization do you work for? He is sure that a confession would never make the regime cut down on the torture, but instead, they would increase it as he weakened. Those who confessed to a crime they had not committed were either executed in prison, rotted away, or on the way to death. He is ready to give up his life with this physical torture, but he would not confess. He is imprisoned for almost thirteen years, and his youth and the best years of his life are lost under this regime, and now, like thousands of detainees who wrote thank-you letters in blood to the regime to get released, he is forced to thank the president as a condition of his release.

Out of prison, Musa's life recounts the hurting and bizarre months, a telling précis of the emotional trauma wreaked over this perpetuity of institutionalized mortification. The changes in his life are devastatingly poignant and palpable: from an impassive, rebellious, young man with optimism, boosted by strength, full of energy to start his own business, he is now unimaginably transformed into an old man, crestfallen, alienated, and worn-out in the outside world. He questions himself, "Am I the same person I was thirteen years ago? Yes and no. A small yes and a big no" (Khalifa 3). His family becomes anxious for him, making their best efforts to bring him back to a normal life and start a family, but he finds a gap between himself and other people. Even his feelings for his family are neutral and detached. He believes that his language for communication is dead. He isolates himself completely from his surroundings, and feels that they "had their world and I had mine, or else that I had no world at all. Certainly, I did not belong to their world" (240). He finds the outside world meaningless and boring, though he had been planning to do a lot of things while he was inside

the prison. He has no desire to adopt a new life, and, on the contrary, considers it "tiresome and stupid to live like them" (251). He becomes increasingly isolated from the company of humanity and remains immersed in the prison life he had grown accustomed to. One year passes, but still, he finds himself in the Desert prison. He questions, "Would I take my imprisonment with me to grave?" (250) or "had the joy died inside me in that crush of death? Would I remain like this? And why? Would I have to carry the threshing floors of death and torture on my chest forever, to choke everything that was beautiful in life?" (216). He tries to escape all the dejection and misery, but there is something inside him that refuses to accept happiness and laugh wholeheartedly. He cannot recover from the misery he faced during his imprisonment and is thus unable to release himself psychologically.

In the context of the Syrian civil war, Mustafa Khalifa's *The Shell* has emerged as a potent symbol of opposition, aiming to expose the acts of brutality and violence perpetrated by the regime. The book serves not only as a denunciation of the Syrian government but also as a universal rallying cry for freedom and justice against arbitrary military and political oppression. Khalifa's narrative captures the harrowing experiences of those who have faced dehumanization, cruelty, and suffering, hoping to ensure that Syria will never again witness the construction of another military prison like Tadmur. The narratives of innocent prisoners, who endured unimaginable hardships and were often executed without cause, must not be forgotten. The widespread dissemination of evidence, including photographic proof of the atrocities committed in Syria, has amplified global awareness of the regime's inhuman activities. These visuals shared on social media platforms have brought the traumatic conditions endured by Musa and countless other prisoners into sharp focus, providing a vital standpoint on the tragic realities faced by the Syrian people under Assad's regime. Musa's story, as depicted in *The Shell*, exemplifies the psychological toll of institutionalized detention. Over time, Musa becomes deeply entangled with the community of detainees, a psychological condition that renders him unable to fully disentangle from his experiences. The trauma of his imprisonment manifests as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition that continually forces him to relive the horrendous incidents of his past. For Musa and others like him, the scars of such tribulations are enduring, preventing them from ever fully recovering. Musa's release from physical imprisonment does not equate to liberation from his psychological captivity. He remains trapped in a liminal space, caught between the semblance of freedom and the lingering effects of his trauma. Despite being physically free, his mind is perpetually haunted by the memories of his imprisonment, making him a lifelong victim of trauma.

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