

Trauma of Survival and the Politics of Memory in Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*

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Abstract

*Emile Habiby's The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist (1974) presents one of the most innovative and politically complex literary responses to the Palestinian Nakba and its enduring consequences. Through a distinctive fusion of satire, irony, absurdity, political allegory, and fragmented narration, Habiby departs from conventional representations of trauma and resistance. Rather than portraying Palestinian survival as a heroic or triumphant process of recovery, the novel presents survival as an unstable and deeply contradictory condition marked by psychological fragmentation, moral compromise, historical displacement, and persistent uncertainty. Saeed's paradoxical identity as a "pessoptimist" embodies the dilemmas of Palestinians who remained within the borders of the newly established Israeli state and were compelled to negotiate systems of surveillance, coercion, and political domination. This paper examines how Habiby transforms satire into a powerful narrative strategy for articulating collective trauma while simultaneously constructing a counter-memory that challenges dominant colonial historiography and the systematic erasure of Palestinian experience. Drawing upon Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through," Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, and Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, the study investigates the complex relationship between trauma, memory, identity, and historical narration in the novel. It argues that Saeed's fractured consciousness, repetitive recollections, and ironic self-fashioning reveal the unresolved psychological and historical consequences of the Nakba. Furthermore, the paper explores how fractured chronology, spectral imagery, multilingual expressions, family histories, place names, and absurd political encounters function as repositories of Palestinian historical consciousness. Habiby's satirical mode does not trivialize suffering; rather, humour and irony become strategies for exposing the violence and contradictions of settler-colonial power. By destabilizing official versions of history, the novel creates an alternative space in which silenced memories, erased landscapes, and fragmented identities can be recovered and re-narrated. Ultimately, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* emerges as a literary counter-archive that preserves Palestinian collective memory, resists historical erasure, and demonstrates the capacity of satire to articulate trauma that conventional realist narration may be unable to fully contain.*

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Received Date: July 10, 2026

Accepted Date: July 17, 2026

Published Date: July 22, 2026

Citation: Diana Singnarpi, Shreyashi Mukherjee, Trauma of Survival and the Politics of Memory in Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*. *Emerging Trends in Languages*. 2026; 3(2): 34–47p.

Keywords: Emile habiby, trauma, nakba, memory, postmemory, satire.

INTRODUCTION

Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* occupies a unique place in modern Palestinian literature because it narrates the experience of those Palestinians who remained within the borders of the newly established State of Israel after the Nakba of 1948. Rather than presenting a conventional narrative of national resistance or heroic survival, Habiby constructs an anti-hero whose life unfolds amid bureaucratic absurdity, political compromise, and emotional

dislocation. Saeed's contradictory identity as both survivor and collaborator encapsulates the paradoxes of Palestinian existence under settler colonial rule. His very name, "Saeed," meaning "happy," becomes deeply ironic when contrasted with a life marked by displacement, surveillance, and continual humiliation [1].

In each letter, Saeed updates the journalist on what had occurred in his life, beginning with his childhood and his experiences during the war of 1948. After the war, he sneaks back into Palestine, intent on following in the footsteps of his late father, who was a Zionist collaborator. He seems to have few qualms about the informing on his own people. On the instructions of his Sephardic Jewish boss, Saeed dutifully targets communist activists. After his boss facilitates his marriage to Baqiyya, they have a son, Walaa. Having neglected their son so much of his childhood, Saeed and Baqiyya are shocked to find out that Walaa has become a fedaiy, or freedom fighter. Under threat from Israeli soldiers, Baqiyya desperately tries to convince her son to surrender and save his life. In response, Walaa critiques his parents' cautious and submissive approach. He articulates what it has been like to grow up with only whispers and shame, leading Baqiyya to make a dramatic decision [2].

The novel refuses linear historical narration and instead employs fragmented episodes, irony, fantasy, and epistolary confession to represent a traumatic past that cannot be fully assimilated into coherent memory [3]. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is not simply an overwhelming event but "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available". Habiby's fractured narrative exemplifies this understanding of trauma, for Saeed repeatedly returns to experiences of dispossession that resist chronological ordering and stable interpretation. His memories emerge unexpectedly through digressions, interruptions, and absurd encounters, revealing trauma as an experience that continually returns rather than one that can be conclusively narrated [4].

The novel also reflects what Dominick LaCapra identifies as the oscillation between "acting out" and "working through" traumatic history. According to LaCapra, victims of historical catastrophe often become trapped in compulsive repetitions of the past before achieving critical reflection. Saeed continually reenacts the contradictions of his condition through irony, self-deprecation, and comic evasions. These narrative repetitions are not merely stylistic devices but manifestations of unresolved historical violence. At the same time, Habiby's satire encourages readers to move beyond passive repetition toward critical engagement with the political structures that perpetuate Palestinian dispossession [5].

Habiby further demonstrates that memory itself becomes a site of political struggle. Edward Said observes that "the struggle over geography is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings" (*Culture and Imperialism*). The destruction of Palestinian villages, the renaming of landscapes, and the suppression of indigenous histories are therefore accompanied by competing narratives of memory. Through Saeed's ironic recollections, Habiby reconstructs erased histories and transforms literature into an alternative archive capable of preserving experiences excluded from official state historiography [6].

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory further illuminates the novel's significance beyond its immediate historical moment. Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before" [5]. Although Habiby's narrative primarily follows a first-generation survivor, its confessional structure continually anticipates future readers who inherit the emotional and ethical burden of remembering Palestine. The novel thus functions not merely as testimony but as an act of transmission that safeguards collective memory across generations [7].

Likewise, Michael Rothberg challenges competitive models of historical suffering by proposing that memory is fundamentally relational. As he argues, "memories are not owned by groups but are

shared, borrowed, and productive of new forms of solidarity” [5]. Habiby's narrative participates in this multidirectional understanding of memory by positioning Palestinian dispossession within broader histories of colonial violence, displacement, and political repression while maintaining the historical specificity of the Nakba.

The present study argues that *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* transforms satire into a sophisticated discourse of trauma and remembrance. By combining irony with fragmented narration, spectral imagery, and linguistic experimentation, Habiby exposes the psychological consequences of surviving under settler colonialism while simultaneously resisting the erasure of Palestinian history. Drawing upon trauma studies, memory theory, and postcolonial criticism, this paper demonstrates that Habiby's "pessoptimism" represents not resignation but a complex ethical strategy through which survival, memory, and resistance remain inseparable [8].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs an interdisciplinary framework that combines trauma studies, memory studies, and postcolonial criticism to examine how Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* narrates Palestinian survival after the Nakba. Habiby's novel transcends conventional political realism by presenting trauma as a fractured psychological experience while simultaneously exposing the ideological mechanisms through which colonial power suppresses historical memory. The theoretical perspectives of Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Marianne Hirsch, Michael Rothberg, and Edward Said provide the conceptual foundation for understanding the novel's representation of memory, identity, and resistance [9].

TRAUMA THEORY

Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma offers an important framework for understanding the novel's fragmented narrative structure. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth argues that trauma cannot be fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence because it overwhelms ordinary consciousness. Instead, it returns belatedly through intrusive memories, repetition, and fragmented narration. She writes, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature the way it was precisely not known in the first instance returns to haunt the survivor later on" [4]. This conception of trauma explains the discontinuous form of Habiby's novel, where Saeed's recollections emerge through digressions, ironic interruptions, and surreal encounters rather than chronological narration.

Rather than recounting the Nakba as a completed historical event, Habiby portrays it as an ongoing psychic condition that repeatedly interrupts the present. Saeed's shifting memories, contradictory statements, and unstable identity illustrate the persistence of traumatic experience beyond the historical moment of catastrophe. Trauma therefore functions not simply as a personal psychological wound but as an enduring political condition produced by displacement, surveillance, and settler colonial domination [10].

Dominick LaCapra further develops this understanding by distinguishing between "acting out" and "working through" traumatic experience. According to LaCapra, "acting out is related to repetition, and working through is related to the possibility of coming to terms with problems without denying their importance" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*). Throughout the novel, Saeed repeatedly reenacts his fears through irony, self-mockery, and contradictory behavior. His comic performances reveal the compulsive repetition characteristic of acting out, while Habiby's satirical narration encourages readers to move toward critical reflection or working through by exposing the structures of colonial violence that produce such psychological fragmentation [11].

MEMORY AND POSTMEMORY

The novel also engages profoundly with questions of historical remembrance and cultural transmission. Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory is particularly valuable for understanding

how traumatic histories continue to shape later generations. Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (*The Generation of Postmemory*). Although Habiby's narrative primarily follows a first-generation survivor of the Nakba, it continually addresses future readers who inherit the responsibility of remembering Palestine through literature.

Habiby's text therefore functions as more than an autobiographical testimony. It becomes an act of cultural preservation through which memories excluded from official historical archives are transmitted across generations. The repeated references to destroyed villages, erased place names, family histories, and oral recollections transform the novel into a literary archive that resists colonial forgetting [12].

MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY

Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory further illuminates the novel's ethical and political significance. Rejecting the notion that different histories of suffering compete for recognition, Rothberg argues that "memory is not a zero-sum game" (*Multidirectional Memory*). Instead, memories interact, overlap, and create new possibilities for solidarity and historical understanding.

Habiby's narrative reflects this multidirectional approach by situating Palestinian dispossession within broader histories of colonialism, exile, genocide, and political violence without diminishing the historical specificity of the Nakba. The novel encourages readers to recognize shared structures of oppression while maintaining the distinctiveness of Palestinian historical experience. Consequently, memory becomes an ethical practice that expands rather than restricts historical understanding [13].

POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

Edward Said's postcolonial criticism provides the broader political context for interpreting Habiby's representation of memory. Said argues that colonial domination depends not only upon military occupation but also upon control over historical narratives. As he observes, "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism" (*Culture and Imperialism*). Habiby's novel directly contests this colonial monopoly over historical representation by recovering Palestinian voices that official discourse attempts to silence.

Similarly, Said emphasizes that "the struggle over geography is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings". Habiby's repeated evocations of destroyed villages, confiscated lands, and erased landscapes demonstrate that colonial violence extends beyond physical displacement into symbolic and cultural erasure. Through satire, irony, and fragmented narration, the novel reconstructs these suppressed histories and transforms literature into an alternative archive of Palestinian memory [7].

Taking together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that trauma, memory, and colonial power are inseparable in *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*. Caruth explains the novel's fractured temporality through the belated return of traumatic experience; LaCapra clarifies the ethical movement between compulsive repetition and critical reflection; Hirsch reveals how memory is transmitted beyond direct witnesses; Rothberg situates Palestinian remembrance within broader global histories of violence; and Said exposes the ideological struggle over historical representation.

Using this interdisciplinary framework, the present study argues that Habiby's concept of "pessoptimism" is neither simple pessimism nor naïve optimism. Instead, it constitutes an aesthetic and political strategy through which trauma becomes narratable, memory resists erasure, and literature itself functions as a powerful act of cultural survival and postcolonial resistance [14].

Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* has attracted considerable scholarly attention because of its innovative combination of satire, political allegory, and postcolonial critique. Critics have examined the novel from multiple perspectives, including Palestinian nationalism, irony, language, identity, memory, and colonial resistance. While these studies have significantly enhanced the understanding of Habiby's literary achievement, comparatively little scholarship has explored how trauma theory and memory studies together illuminate the novel's representation of psychological survival after the Nakba. The present study addresses this gap by bringing trauma studies into dialogue with postmemory and multidirectional memory to demonstrate how Habiby transforms satire into a discourse of historical witnessing.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

One of the most comprehensive studies of Palestinian fiction is Bashir Abu-Manneh's *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present*. Abu-Manneh argues that Palestinian literature emerged as a response to dispossession and colonial domination, continually negotiating questions of exile, nationalism, and historical memory. He identifies Habiby as a pivotal figure whose fiction departed from conventional realism through irony and narrative experimentation. According to Abu-Manneh, Habiby's satire "redefined the political possibilities of the Palestinian novel by exposing contradiction from within" (Abu-Manneh 112). Rather than presenting resistance through heroic nationalism alone, Habiby foregrounds the ambiguities of everyday survival under Israeli rule. Abu-Manneh's analysis is invaluable in situating *The Pessoptimist* within the broader evolution of Palestinian literature, although his study pays comparatively less attention to the psychological dimensions of traumatic memory that shape Saeed's fragmented consciousness [15].

W. A. Al-Khadra argues that *The Pessoptimist* revolutionized the Palestinian novel by combining grotesque humor, absurdity, and political irony in ways that challenged dominant literary conventions. According to Al-Khadra, Habiby's fragmented narrative voice reflects "the fractured consciousness produced by settler colonialism and displacement" (Al-Khadra). This observation is particularly significant because it links literary form with historical violence. However, Al-Khadra's discussion primarily focuses on narrative technique rather than explaining how these formal disruptions correspond to the workings of trauma and memory.

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* remains one of the foundational texts for understanding literary representations of trauma. Caruth contends that traumatic experience cannot be assimilated fully when it occurs because it exceeds ordinary comprehension. Instead, trauma returns through repetition, haunting, and fragmented recollection. As she writes, trauma is characterized by "the way that its very unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth). Caruth's emphasis on belatedness offers an illuminating framework for interpreting Habiby's discontinuous narrative structure. Saeed's memories emerge unpredictably through irony, fantasy, and abrupt temporal shifts, suggesting that the Nakba remains psychologically unresolved rather than historically completed [16].

Dominick LaCapra further refines trauma theory by distinguishing between "acting out" and "working through" historical catastrophe. He argues that "working through is an articulatory practice" that enables critical engagement with traumatic history rather than compulsive repetition (LaCapra). Saeed repeatedly oscillates between these two modes. His comic evasions and ironic self-denials reveal the compulsive repetitions associated with acting out, while Habiby's broader narrative perspective encourages readers to recognize and critically interrogate the structures of colonial domination. LaCapra's model therefore provides a valuable conceptual framework for understanding the ethical complexity of Habiby's satire.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory examines how traumatic histories are transmitted to subsequent generations through stories, images, and cultural practices rather than direct experience.

Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before". Although *The Pessoptimist* primarily recounts the experiences of Nakba survivors themselves, its epistolary form continually addresses imagined future readers who inherit these memories. Habiby's novel therefore functions as a medium through which Palestinian historical consciousness is preserved despite official attempts at erasure.

Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory further broadens this perspective by challenging competitive understandings of historical suffering. Rothberg argues that "memory is not a zero-sum game" but a dynamic process through which different histories illuminate one another. His approach enables readers to situate Palestinian memory within wider global histories of colonialism, displacement, and political violence while preserving the specificity of the Nakba. Habiby's novel participates in precisely such a multidirectional process by inviting ethical comparison without reducing Palestinian suffering to a universal abstraction.

Edward Said's postcolonial criticism remains indispensable for understanding the political dimensions of Habiby's narrative. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said emphasizes that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism". Colonial domination is sustained not only through territorial occupation but also through control over historical representation. Habiby's fiction directly challenges this narrative monopoly by reconstructing Palestinian experiences excluded from official historiography. His satire becomes a literary form of resistance that contests the ideological mechanisms of colonial memory.

Gil Z. Hochberg similarly investigates the intertwined cultural histories of Jews and Palestinians in *In Spite of Partition*. Rejecting rigid national binaries, Hochberg demonstrates how literary texts reveal complex forms of coexistence, conflict, and shared historical experience. Her analysis of bilingualism and divided identities offers valuable insights into Saeed's unstable subjectivity, particularly his continual negotiation between Arabic cultural memory and Hebrew bureaucratic authority (Hochberg). Nevertheless, Hochberg focuses primarily on questions of identity and partition rather than on trauma as a persistent psychological condition.

Critical introductions in Salma Khadra Jayyusi's *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* likewise underscore Habiby's central place in Palestinian literary history. Jayyusi argues that satire becomes a distinctive mode through which Palestinian writers expose political absurdity while preserving cultural resilience (Jayyusi). This perspective reinforces the argument that humor in Habiby's novel should not be interpreted merely as comic entertainment but as an aesthetic strategy for confronting historical catastrophe.

SATIRE AS TRAUMA DISCOURSE

One of Emile Habiby's most remarkable literary achievements in *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* is his transformation of satire into a mode of traumatic testimony. Rather than representing the Palestinian catastrophe through solemn realism or heroic nationalism, Habiby employs irony, absurdity, and black humor to expose the contradictions of life under Israeli settler colonialism. The novel demonstrates that laughter does not negate suffering; instead, it becomes a strategy through which unbearable historical experiences can be narrated. Satire therefore functions not merely as a literary device but as a political language that reveals the psychological consequences of dispossession, surveillance, and everyday humiliation.

Habiby's choice of satire is particularly significant because the Nakba resists conventional forms of representation. The destruction of villages, forced displacement, and fragmentation of Palestinian society created experiences that exceeded the capacity of ordinary historical narration. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to

tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (*Unclaimed Experience*). Trauma therefore demands indirect forms of expression because it cannot be fully assimilated into coherent memory. Habiby's comic narrative reflects precisely this paradox. Instead of recounting historical violence in chronological order, the novel fragments experience through irony, fantasy, and contradiction, suggesting that the absurdity of colonial life itself has become the most truthful mode of representation [17].

The central figure of Saeed embodies this paradoxical relationship between comedy and suffering. His very name, meaning "happy," immediately establishes an ironic contrast with the reality of his existence. Rather than living a life of prosperity or contentment, Saeed survives by continually negotiating the demands of military occupation, bureaucratic authority, and political suspicion. Early in the novel he introduces himself with characteristic irony, confessing that his life has been shaped less by courage than by accommodation and fear. This self-deprecating narrative voice immediately unsettles conventional expectations of the nationalist hero. Instead of presenting an idealized freedom fighter, Habiby offers an ordinary individual whose survival depends upon compromise, hesitation, and contradictory choices.

This ironic self-presentation serves a deeper psychological function. Saeed repeatedly mocks himself before others can judge him, transforming humor into a defensive strategy against humiliation. Such self-directed satire reflects what trauma theorists identify as the fractured consciousness of the survivor. Rather than confronting violence directly, Saeed approaches it obliquely through comic exaggeration, evasive storytelling, and ironic confession. His laughter is therefore neither spontaneous nor liberating; it emerges from an existence structured by fear and uncertainty.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" provides an illuminating framework for understanding these narrative repetitions. According to LaCapra, "acting out is related to repetition, and working through is related to the possibility of coming to terms with problems without denying their importance" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*). Saeed continually reenacts the contradictions of his colonial existence. His repeated attempts to satisfy authority, avoid punishment, and reinterpret his own failures become forms of compulsive repetition. Rather than escaping historical violence, he repeatedly returns to it through comic narration. Habiby thus portrays humor as symptomatic of unresolved trauma rather than evidence of emotional recovery.

At the same time, the novel refuses to reduce satire to individual psychology alone. Habiby's humor also functions as a critique of colonial power. Bureaucratic regulations, arbitrary interrogations, surveillance, and political absurdities are presented with comic exaggeration precisely because their irrationality exposes the contradictions of settler-colonial governance. Edward Said reminds us that "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism" (*Culture and Imperialism*). Habiby contests this monopoly over narrative by allowing the colonized subject to recount history through irony rather than through the language sanctioned by official institutions. Satire thus becomes an act of narrative resistance, exposing the gap between colonial claims of order and the lived realities of Palestinian dispossession.

The novel's comic episodes therefore should not be interpreted merely as moments of entertainment. Instead, they expose the psychological costs of survival under conditions in which moral certainty has become impossible. Saeed's contradictory identity as victim and collaborator, survivor and witness, optimist and pessimist reflects the fractured subjectivity produced by colonial domination. While imprisoned, Saeed encounters a man who identifies himself with pride as a fedaiy, a guerrilla fighter, and a refugee. The prisoner's unwavering sense of purpose and political commitment stands in sharp contrast to Saeed's uncertainty about his own identity. When the man asks Saeed who he is, Saeed finds himself incapable of answering. Reflecting on the encounter, he

confesses, "I did not know what to reveal about my identity before the majestic figure..." (Habiby). His irony continually destabilizes fixed categories of heroism and betrayal, compelling readers to recognize that survival itself has become ethically compromised. Habiby's satire consequently refuses simplistic political binaries and instead reveals the complex emotional terrain inhabited by those who remain after catastrophe.

By transforming irony into a language of historical witnessing, Habiby demonstrates that trauma can be narrated without abandoning literary complexity. Humor does not erase suffering; rather, it reveals the contradictions through which suffering continues to shape everyday life. Satire becomes a form of testimony precisely because it allows the unspeakable to emerge indirectly, preserving historical memory while simultaneously exposing the absurdity of colonial violence.

COMPLICITY, AGENCY, AND THE ETHICS OF SURVIVAL

One of the most provocative aspects of Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessimist* is its refusal to divide its characters into uncomplicated categories of heroes and traitors. Instead, Habiby presents survival under settler colonialism as an ethically fraught condition in which the boundaries between resistance, accommodation, collaboration, and coercion become increasingly unstable. Through the character of Saeed, the novel interrogates the moral dilemmas faced by Palestinians who remained within Israel after the Nakba. Rather than celebrating political purity or condemning compromise outright, Habiby exposes the profound psychological and ethical complexities of living within a colonial system that regulates every aspect of everyday life. Saeed said: "Those like me are everywhere towns, villages, bars, everywhere". The novel consequently challenges readers to reconsider conventional understandings of agency by demonstrating that choices made under conditions of domination cannot be judged according to ordinary moral standards.

Saeed's relationship with Israeli authority illustrates this ethical ambiguity. Throughout the novel, he repeatedly negotiates with bureaucrats, security officials, and government institutions in order to secure his own survival. His actions frequently appear contradictory: at times he complies with authority, at others he expresses quiet resistance through irony and satire. These apparent inconsistencies have led some readers to interpret Saeed as a collaborator. Habiby, however, deliberately refuses such simplistic interpretations. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that colonial rule narrows the range of possible choices until survival itself becomes entangled with compromise. Saeed does not collaborate because he believes in colonial ideology; rather, he acts within structures that systematically limit political and personal autonomy.

Dominick LaCapra's reflections on trauma illuminate this ethical predicament. LaCapra argues that traumatic societies often destabilize conventional distinctions between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders because violence reshapes the moral landscape itself. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing historical complexity without erasing responsibility (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 78). Habiby's portrayal of Saeed reflects precisely this complexity. His repeated compromises are neither celebrated nor simply condemned; instead, they reveal how colonial domination transforms ordinary survival into an ethically burdensome condition. The novel therefore resists binary judgments and instead invites readers to examine the structural forces that produce moral ambiguity [18].

Judith Butler's concept of precarity further clarifies Saeed's position. In *Precarious Life*, Butler argues that political violence creates populations whose lives remain permanently exposed to insecurity, arguing that "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies". Saeed embodies this condition of precarity. His existence is shaped by continual surveillance, legal uncertainty, and the constant possibility of exclusion. Under such circumstances, agency cannot be understood as unrestricted freedom. Every decision is constrained by the threat of punishment, displacement, or further marginalization. Habiby therefore demonstrates that ethical judgment must account for the unequal conditions within which individuals act.

The novel also challenges romanticized narratives of resistance that assume heroism is always available to the oppressed. Saeed is neither a revolutionary leader nor a fearless nationalist martyr. He is an ordinary individual attempting to preserve his life amid extraordinary political circumstances. His fears, hesitations, and contradictions reflect the realities of colonial existence more accurately than idealized images of resistance. Habiby thereby expands the concept of political agency beyond spectacular acts of defiance to include the everyday negotiations through which marginalized individuals endure oppressive systems. Survival itself becomes a form of political persistence, even when it involves painful compromises.

Edward Said's understanding of colonial domination reinforces this interpretation. Said argues that imperial power extends beyond military occupation to shape the cultural, psychological, and intellectual lives of colonized peoples (*Culture and Imperialism*). Colonialism therefore transforms not only political institutions but also the conditions under which ethical decisions are made. Saeed's contradictory behaviour reflects this pervasive influence. His continual negotiation with authority illustrates how colonial power penetrates everyday existence, making complete autonomy virtually impossible. Habiby does not excuse moral compromise; rather, he reveals the political structures that produce it.

The ethical complexity of the novel is also illuminated through Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of responsibility. Levinas argues that ethics begins with the encounter with the Other, whose vulnerability imposes an infinite responsibility upon the self (*Totality and Infinity*). Habiby's narrative repeatedly foregrounds encounters marked by vulnerability, displacement, and fear. Yet colonial violence disrupts these ethical relationships by replacing mutual recognition with surveillance, suspicion, and bureaucratic control. Saeed's interactions are often mediated through institutions that reduce individuals to files, permits, or security concerns. The novel thereby demonstrates how colonial systems undermine ethical reciprocity by subordinating human relationships to administrative power.

Despite these conditions, Habiby refuses to portray Saeed as entirely passive. His most significant acts of resistance occur through narration itself. By recounting his experiences with irony and self-conscious humour, Saeed reclaims the authority to interpret his own history. His narrative exposes the absurdity of colonial bureaucracy while preserving memories that official discourse attempts to erase. In this sense, storytelling becomes an ethical practice through which individual experience is transformed into collective testimony. Saeed's voice resists political silencing even when his actions appear compromised. Habiby thus suggests that narrative itself constitutes a form of agency capable of challenging dominant historical representations.

Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory also contributes to understanding this ethical dimension. Rothberg argues that memory creates possibilities for dialogue and solidarity rather than reinforcing fixed identities (*Multidirectional Memory*). Habiby's novel similarly refuses rigid moral classifications. Instead of separating victims and collaborators into mutually exclusive categories, it portrays colonial society as a complex field in which individuals occupy shifting and often contradictory positions. This ethical openness encourages readers to move beyond simplistic judgments toward a more historically informed understanding of human behaviour under conditions of political violence.

Furthermore, Habiby's satire prevents the novel from becoming either a moral indictment or a sentimental defence of its protagonist. Humour continually interrupts certainty, exposing the limitations of absolute political categories. Saeed's comic failures reveal his weaknesses, yet they also expose the irrationality of the colonial system that produces those failures. The "big man," an Israeli police officer, exploits Saeed's vulnerability by reminding him that he has no one else to rely upon. Rather than offering protection, he uses Saeed's isolation as a tool of intimidation and control. As

Saeed recounts, "I had, he said, no one to turn to but him, and he threatened me with imprisonment, torture, and starvation" (Habiby). Readers are therefore encouraged to evaluate both individual actions and the broader structures of domination within which those actions occur. Such an approach reflects Habiby's broader political vision, in which ethical responsibility requires confronting systems of oppression rather than merely condemning individuals who struggle to survive within them.

Ultimately, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* redefines agency under settler colonialism by demonstrating that survival itself is ethically complex. Saeed's compromises do not negate his humanity; rather, they expose the impossible choices imposed by colonial rule. Through irony, satire, and moral ambiguity, Habiby dismantles simplistic distinctions between heroism and collaboration, replacing them with a nuanced exploration of vulnerability, responsibility, and endurance. The novel therefore invites readers to understand survival not as a sign of moral failure but as a deeply contested ethical practice shaped by historical violence. In doing so, Habiby offers a profound meditation on the human costs of colonial domination while affirming the enduring importance of memory, testimony, and narrative resistance.

POSTMEMORY AND THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS

Although *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* primarily recounts the experiences of Palestinians who directly witnessed the Nakba, its significance extends far beyond the generation of immediate survivors. Emile Habiby's novel is fundamentally concerned with the transmission of historical memory and the ethical responsibility of preserving experiences threatened by political erasure. By transforming individual recollections into literary testimony, Habiby ensures that the catastrophe of 1948 continues to shape the consciousness of later generations. The novel therefore functions not only as a narrative of survival but also as a cultural archive through which collective memory is inherited, reconstructed, and continually reinterpreted.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides the most productive framework for understanding this process of intergenerational transmission. Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (*The Generation of Postmemory*). Unlike direct memory, postmemory is mediated through narrative, photographs, family traditions, and cultural practices. Although subsequent generations do not experience the original catastrophe firsthand, they inherit its emotional and psychological consequences through acts of remembrance. Habiby's novel anticipates precisely this process by transforming Saeed's personal experiences into a narrative addressed to readers who did not directly witness the Nakba but nevertheless become its ethical inheritors.

The epistolary and confessional structure of *The Pessoptimist* reinforces this intergenerational orientation. Saeed does not merely recount his own life; he speaks as though he is preserving fragments of a history that official archives have neglected or deliberately erased. His ironic voice continually oscillates between private confession and collective testimony, demonstrating that personal memory cannot be separated from national history. Every recollection of displacement, bureaucratic humiliation, and social exclusion contributes to a larger narrative of Palestinian endurance. Through this narrative strategy, Habiby transforms the individual witness into a custodian of collective memory.

The novel repeatedly demonstrates that memory survives not only through historical documents but also through ordinary cultural practices. Names of villages, family histories, oral storytelling, familiar landscapes, and everyday customs function as repositories of historical consciousness, preserving memories that resist erasure despite displacement and political upheaval. In *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, Saeed invokes his ancestral roots by declaring that his "pessoptimist family is truly noble and long established in our land" (Habiby's). These seemingly ordinary details acquire

extraordinary political significance because they preserve forms of knowledge excluded from official state narratives. As Edward Said observes, imperial power seeks "to block other narratives from forming and emerging" (*Culture and Imperialism* xiii). Colonial domination therefore operates not only through territorial occupation but also through the suppression of indigenous memory. Habiby's insistence upon preserving Palestinian experiences through literature directly challenges this narrative exclusion, ensuring that histories of dispossession remain accessible despite institutional attempts at erasure.

This literary preservation becomes especially significant because the Nakba involved the destruction not only of homes and villages but also of historical continuity itself. Forced displacement fragmented communities, interrupted family histories, and disrupted cultural traditions. Habiby's fragmented narrative mirrors these historical ruptures while simultaneously resisting them. Instead of reconstructing an artificial sense of historical completeness, the novel preserves the fractures, silences, and discontinuities that characterize traumatic memory. These absences become evidence of violence rather than signs of narrative failure. By acknowledging what cannot be fully recovered, Habiby demonstrates that memory remains faithful to history precisely through its incompleteness.

Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma further illuminates this dynamic. Caruth argues that trauma is transmitted through stories that continue to address later generations because they contain experiences that have never been fully assimilated (*Unclaimed Experience*). Traumatic memory therefore exceeds the lifespan of individual survivors, demanding continual reinterpretation by those who inherit its unresolved questions. Habiby's narrative exemplifies this process. Saeed's fragmented recollections refuse closure because they remain addressed to future readers who must confront the ethical implications of remembering historical injustice. The novel thus transforms literature into an ongoing dialogue between generations rather than a completed historical account.

The ethical dimensions of memory are further clarified through Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory. Rothberg argues that memories do not exist in isolation but interact across historical contexts, producing new forms of ethical engagement and political solidarity. He emphasizes that "memory is not a zero-sum game" (*Multidirectional Memory* 3). Habiby's novel reflects this principle by presenting Palestinian memory as both historically specific and universally significant. While firmly rooted in the experience of the Nakba, the narrative invites broader reflection upon exile, statelessness, colonial domination, and the human consequences of political violence. Saeed said that when father fell a martyr on the open road, his family took the boat to Acre. He narrated: "When we found that we were in no danger, and that everyone was busy having their skins, we fled to Lebanon to save ours. And there we sold them to live" (Habiby's).

. Such multidirectional remembrance does not diminish Palestinian suffering; rather, it situates it within wider conversations about justice, displacement, and historical responsibility.

Habiby's emphasis on storytelling also challenges the limitations of official historiography. Archives, government records, and legal documents frequently privilege the perspectives of political authority, leaving marginalized voices unheard. Literature, however, preserves emotional truths that institutional histories often overlook. Saeed's narrative records fear, uncertainty, humiliation, longing, and resilience experiences that cannot be adequately represented through administrative documentation alone. His testimony therefore functions as what may be described as a counter-memory, recovering histories excluded from dominant political discourse. The novel demonstrates that fiction can preserve historical truth not despite its imaginative form but because of it.

Moreover, the inheritance of memory in Habiby's novel is not passive. Later generations are not simply recipients of historical narratives; they become active interpreters responsible for preserving and rearticulating those memories within changing political circumstances. Hirsch emphasizes that postmemory involves imaginative investment as well as historical knowledge. Readers are therefore called not merely to understand the past intellectually but to engage with it ethically. Habiby's novel encourages precisely this form of engagement by refusing sentimental nostalgia while simultaneously insisting that historical injustice cannot be forgotten.

This ethical responsibility extends beyond Palestinian communities themselves. By translating local experiences of displacement into universally intelligible questions concerning justice, identity, and historical violence, Habiby broadens the scope of remembrance. The novel invites international readers to participate in the work of historical witnessing without appropriating or universalizing Palestinian suffering. Its enduring significance lies precisely in its capacity to preserve the specificity of the Nakba while demonstrating its relevance to broader discussions of colonialism, memory, and human rights [19].

Ultimately, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* reveals that survival is inseparable from remembrance. The novel demonstrates that historical trauma does not conclude with the generation that first experiences it but continues through stories, cultural practices, and literary representation. By transforming individual testimony into collective memory, Habiby constructs a powerful counter-archive that resists colonial erasure and ensures that the history of Palestinian dispossession remains ethically and politically visible. In doing so, he affirms that literature is not merely a reflection of memory but one of its most enduring forms of preservation and transmission.

CONCLUSION

Emile Habiby's *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* remains one of the most innovative and intellectually challenging works of Palestinian literature because it reimagines the relationship between trauma, memory, satire, and survival within the context of settler colonialism. Rather than presenting the Nakba as a completed historical event, Habiby demonstrates that its consequences continue to shape Palestinian identity, historical consciousness, and everyday existence. Through the contradictory figure of Saeed, the novel dismantles simplistic distinctions between heroism and collaboration, resistance and accommodation, revealing the profound ethical ambiguities that characterize survival under colonial domination. Satire, therefore, emerges not as a denial of suffering but as an alternative language through which traumatic experiences that resist conventional representation become narratable.

Drawing upon Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, this study has demonstrated that Habiby's fragmented narrative structure reflects the belated and repetitive nature of traumatic memory. Saeed's disrupted recollections, ironic confessions, and fractured temporality reveal that the Nakba remains psychologically unresolved, continually intruding upon the present rather than receding into the past. Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" further illuminates Saeed's repeated negotiations with colonial authority, showing that his moral ambiguity reflects structural violence rather than individual weakness. Habiby thereby refuses both sentimental victimhood and simplistic political judgment, encouraging readers to confront the ethical complexity of survival within oppressive political systems.

The study has also shown that memory functions as a central form of resistance throughout the novel. Through Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory and Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, Habiby's narrative can be understood as a literary counter-archive that preserves Palestinian history against colonial erasure. Storytelling, linguistic memory, irony, and everyday cultural practices become vehicles through which displaced communities maintain historical continuity despite the destruction of physical landscapes and official attempts to suppress indigenous

narratives. The novel thus transforms individual testimony into collective remembrance, ensuring that the experience of the Nakba continues to speak to subsequent generations.

Furthermore, Habiby's representation of language demonstrates that colonial domination extends beyond territorial occupation into the realm of discourse itself. Arabic preserves cultural memory and communal identity, whereas bureaucratic language frequently symbolizes the mechanisms through which colonial power regulates and categorizes Palestinian lives. By exposing these linguistic hierarchies, Habiby reveals how historical violence operates simultaneously at political, cultural, and psychological levels. His multilingual narrative ultimately challenges the authority of official discourse by restoring marginalized voices to the historical record.

Equally significant is the novel's exploration of agency. Saeed's contradictory actions reveal that resistance under settler colonialism rarely assumes heroic or spectacular forms. Instead, Habiby locates political agency within everyday acts of endurance, narration, and remembrance. Survival itself becomes an ethical practice that resists erasure while acknowledging the compromises imposed by unequal structures of power. Through irony and self-conscious narration, Saeed reclaims the authority to interpret his own history, thereby transforming storytelling into an act of political resistance.

Ultimately, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* demonstrates that literature performs a crucial function in preserving historical memory when official archives fail to acknowledge the experiences of the dispossessed. Habiby's fusion of satire, trauma, memory, and political critique offers a compelling alternative to dominant colonial historiography by foregrounding the voices of those who continue to live with the consequences of displacement. The novel therefore remains not only a landmark of Palestinian literature but also a major contribution to trauma studies, memory studies, and postcolonial criticism. Its enduring relevance lies in its insistence that remembering is itself an ethical and political act through which histories of injustice continue to demand recognition, accountability, and justice.

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