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**NAVIGATING MORAL DILEMMAS, IDENTITY CRISIS AND
THE POLITICS OF BELONGING IN CONFLICT ZONES: A
CRITICAL STUDY OF KATOUH'S '*AS LONG AS THE LEMON
TREES GROW*'**



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Abstract

This study seeks to explore the intertwined relationship between war, morality and belonging in war torn regions through the lens of Henri & John's Social Identity Theory (1979), particularly focusing on Katouh's novel, 'As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow' (2022). The study focuses on the view that war or conflict zones are not only places of physical destruction but also spaces of moral, ethical and social disruption and reconstruction where social identities, ethical frameworks and moral values are continuously tested, shaken and reconstructed over course of time. The study examines how prolonged exposure to conflict, dislocation and uncertainty led the individuals to navigate through morally ambiguous conditions where survival collides with conventional ethical patterns. Through the critical lens of Social Identity Theory, the study analyzes how war strengthens in-group and out-group divisions creating the sense of identity and belonging heavily politicized, brittle and totally conditional. In conflict zones, individuals make meaning and draw sense of security from their group affiliations; however, displacement, trauma and social fragmentation makes these affiliations fragile and destabilized consequently making belonging fluid and contested molded and designed by fear, loyalty and need for survival. The present study is qualitative in nature and relies on textual analysis of the novel to examine the shifts in moral reasoning of the individuals from conventional ethical principles to situational morality particularly in war zone. The textual analysis demonstrates how moral dilemmas, emotional trauma and identity fragmentation is confronted by the characters while preserving their humanity. Incorporating literary analysis with Social Identity Theory and conflict studies, this study provides a multidimensional understanding of individuals negotiating morality and reconstruction of belonging in conflict zones. Eventually, the study concludes that sense of identity and morality are highly adaptive and dynamic reshaped by individuals' lived experiences and mutual struggle in times of conflict.

Keywords: moral dilemmas, identity fragmentation, ethical values, belonging, dislocation, war zone

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, war has been scrutinized in line with its prominent manifestations such as economic destruction, physical imbalance, and involuntary displacement. Moral disengagement and identity crisis are the deeper incarnations beyond these structural conditions. War zones explicitly reconstruct psychological and social makeup of individuals for self-recognition and others. This paper examined role of war in reshaping identity and social morality in ambiguous and vague conflict zones under the title "Navigating Moral Dilemmas, Identity Crisis and the Politics of Belonging in Conflict Zones: A Critical study of Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow*" (Katouh, 2022). This research utilized the underpinnings of Henri and John's Social Identity Theory

(SIT) which expounded that individuals deduce their social identity from association to groups as they contributed in emotional intelligence, mutual understanding, and a sense of togetherness. Conversely, identities in war zones lack stability and became polarized (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Conflicts continuously transformed identity into a survival mechanism and a source of division as it exaggerated “in-groups” and “out-groups” distinctions (Brewer, 1999).

With the escalation of violence, relationship becomes politicized and conditional, often examined by political affiliation, loyalty, and ethnic connection instead of mutual humanity. In this regard, belonging and inclusion may be perceived as the social and empathetic exposure of inclusivity and receptivity within a group. Ideologically, war disturbed the sense of belonging by fragmenting groups and families that tend to shape social identity. Furthermore, migration exaggerated division by pushing individuals into new spaces which often lack acceptance and compromised identities. Resultantly, mostly individuals face unstable identity, oscillating between nostalgia of home, current realities of risky survival, and unpredictable future. Bandura (1999) elaborated that "decisions involving silence, resistance, deception, or sacrifice become deeply situational rather than universally moral". Similarly, war fundamentally transforms moral behavior as morality is the set of principles that differentiate right and wrong, became translucent in war zones.

In peaceful conditions, morality is reinforced by law and norms but in war zones legal system collapsed. Often, individuals stuck with moral dilemmas where survival depends on actions contradictory to ethical norms. Life decisions such as resistance, and silence became increasingly situational. So, war is not ultimate absence of moral values but a complete alteration of morality shaped by trauma, fear, and survival under studied novel provided attractive literary representation of these structures. Resultantly, "individuals in conflict zones often experience identity instability, existing between memories of home, present realities of survival, and uncertain futures" (Malkki, 1995).

Yuval-Davis (2006) maintained that "war fundamentally disrupts this process by dismantling families, communities, and social institutions that traditionally anchor identity". Experiences of the characters and their narratives navigated role of war in fracturing identity, fragmenting belonging, and pushing individuals into morally grey circumstances. Repetitive image of lemon trees symbolizes resilience and continuity in the destruction, expounding that hope grows despite extreme devastation (Katouh, 2022).

This study relies on interdisciplinary method by integrating Social Identity Theory, moral psychology, and literary analysis to illustrate the connection between war, morality, and belonging. Research maintained that despite being sites of ultimate destruction, war zones are spaces of reconstruction to reshape social identity and morality. By examining these interconnected dimensions, the study seeks to contribute in practical understanding of the human conditions in times of conflict and also emphasize that the struggle for survival in all conditions is deeply aligned with the struggle to preserve humanity as a whole.

1.1 Research Objectives

- To navigate how continuous exposure to war alters individual's sense of morality and gives rise to ethical dilemmas in everyday struggle for survival.
- To analyze how conflict and enforced displacement transforms the concept of belonging and making it vague, politicized, and polarized.

1.2 Research Questions

- How do individuals in war zones navigate moral dilemmas inspite of survival pressures and collapsing moral and social framework?
- In what ways do armed conflicts recalibrates and reshape social identity and the sense of belonging among affected populations?

2. Literature Review

Contemporary literature on war, moral dilemmas, and a mutual sense of belonging significantly titled towards interdisciplinary approaches to integrate politics, sociology, psychology, and trauma related studies. According to latest researches (2024-2026) expounded that in addition to being a geopolitical phenomenon of destruction, war is fundamentally a psychological experience of shaping identity and reconstruct self-recognition in-group and out-group as explained by SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In Netherlands, refugees navigated that mutual feelings of inclusion were often influenced by acceptance, psychological makeup, and discrimination, highlighting that belonging is a socially negotiated phenomenon (Damen et al., 2024). Furthermore, Jetten et al (2024) in a study published in *Social Science & Medicine* on Ukrainian refugees illustrated that social identity in post-displacement spaces significantly decreases moral dilemmas and increased resilience, contrastively mere identity as a “refugees” exaggerated trauma. Resultantly, these studies reinforced SIT's view point that group membership is a source of both safety and exclusion in war zones (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Recent studies also emphasized recreation of social identity under involuntary mobility. Syrian and Afghan refugees in interviews explained that migrants develop multi layered identity shaped by attachment to homeland and integration of host society (Ahmadipour and Sordé-Martí, 2024). Results of the interview suggested that post migration identity and belonging became polarized and compromised.

Additionally, recent literature navigated the relationship of war and social cohesion. Mayer et al. (2024) elaborated that war and involuntary migration alter inter group perceptions and mutual safety, exaggerating social polarization and strengthening group affiliation. Similarly, Kossowska et al. (2023) emphasized that feelings of belonging, mutual destiny, and social identity significantly influence social acceptance and empathy toward refugees. Findings of these studies maintained that conflict exaggerates both inclusionary and exclusionary dimensions of identity creation, supporting current study that belonging and morality are simultaneously reshaped in war zones.

Similarly, Van der Ent (2024) maintained that "refugee-background Syrian youth in Rotterdam experienced multiple and evolving forms of belonging, where attachment to homeland coexisted with gradual identification with the host society". Likewise, extensive studies focused moral compromises in conflicts. Walzer (1977), in *Just and Unjust wars* emphasized that conflicts tend to challenge present moral system but demanding evaluation on just war theory. Although, critics expounded that wars barely need moral distinctions.

According to Fassin and Pandolfi (2010), humanitarian conflicts generate “moral economies” where survival is often prioritized over morality. Similarly, Grossman (1995) in *On Killing* explained that individuals in conflict environments face psychological traumas, altering moral values against destruction. Collectively, this literature emphasized that in wars morality is non-static but tend to be highly adaptive, often created by survival and necessity. In relation to displacement, belonging and

moral traumas have been studied widely. Belonging is both an emotional attachment and a political strategy, deeply engraved in power structures (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In war zones, migration collapsed traditional concept of belonging, contributing in identity distinction.

In 1995, Malaki elaborated that migrants tend to recreate belonging through illusion homelands. Likewise refugee camps acted as “spaces of exception” where identity and belonging redefined under crucial circumstances (Agier, 2011). Recent studies also emphasized on moral and social identity under unpredictable circumstances. Bandura’s (1999) theory of moral disengagement explained that individuals tend to justify dangerous actions by reinterpreting moral norms and social values, relevant to conflict zones where devastation can be rationalized. Ordinary individuals may become source of violence under war conditions, emphasizing that conditionality override traditional morality (Staub, 2003).

3. Methodology and Theoretical Framework (Social Identity Theory)

The present study is qualitative in nature and focuses on text in order to collect and analyze the data. Data is taken from the novel by adopting purposive sampling technique and the selected textual lines are analyzed through the lens of Social Identity Theory which makes up the theoretical foundation of this study. This research is developed on Henri and John's Social Identity Theory (1979) which elaborated the construction of identity and belonging according to affiliation to specific communities. Moreover, SIT advocated that instead of being a solely individual psychological character identity is a socially driven phenomena shaped by membership of certain groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These communal affiliations are the source of emotional intelligence, belonging, and set patterns for dissection of social identity and reality.

The pivotal point of SIT (1979) is the distinction between inter and intra groups, leading to categorization of individuals dominated by favoritism and discrimination based on group membership. Conflict zones exaggerate categorization by imposing existential threat, while on the other hand, under stable conditions such fragmentation tend to balance. Resultantly, reshaping conditional belonging related to survival and empathies toward certain community.

According to this study, SIT (1979) expounded the reconstruction of belonging as a vague and polarized phenomenon (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). During the course of war, previous individual identities tend to be fragmented due to forced migration and violence. Conflicts give rise to conditions of extreme existential crisis, strengthening community affiliation and marked boundaries between “us” and “them” (Haslam et al., 2009).

Individuals are pushed towards reinterpretation of group membership for social acceptance and safety. This elaborated fluid and static nature of belonging influenced by political circumstances and group affiliations. Social Identity Theory (1979) explained the process of moral decision-making in conflict zones as group activities and group loyalties tend to interpret morally justified actions and out-group loyalties are condemned, leading to group relativity transformed by group actions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Therefore, in war zones moral dilemmas are products of mutual identity. Recent researches on refugees maintained that "social belonging functions as a protective psychological mechanism against trauma and emotional isolation"(Jetten et al., 2024).

Additionally, SIT (1979) explained reconstruction of social identity in displaced zones as previous community structures collapsed individuals tend to create new group membership based on mutual experiences of moral dilemmas and survival. These newly formed identities acted as alternative belonging, showcasing the dynamic nature of identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to Yuval-

Davis (2006), "original social structures collapse; individuals seek alternative forms of belonging through refugee communities, emotional networks, and shared experiences of suffering". On the whole, Social Identity Theory (1979) provided a brief framework for analyzing role of war in altering both morality and a sense of belonging.

4. Data Analysis

In war zones, violence tends to disrupt both social identity and social structures, complicating interconnected relationship between morality, sense of belonging, and war. Under the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this study examined portrayal of fragmentation and reconstruction of identity, belonging, and moral values during the course of war in the novel. As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow (Katouh, 2022) particularly reflected theoretical as well as empirical findings that war and conflict is not only confined to physical destruction but also significantly contributed to psychological and ethical devastation, altering emotional affection, moral principles, and social identity.

According to Tajfel & Turner (1979), individuals seek to shape their identity and self-concept from group membership as in normal conditions these affiliations provided emotional protection, collective belonging, and mutual identity. On the other hand, conflicts polarized and politicized these social identities. Under observation novel illustrated transformation of identity through the lived experience of Salama, whose social identity gradually transform from a medical student to a war survivor suffering conflict driven uncertainty. Her words, *"I used to know who I was before the war began,"* navigates the identity fragmentation motivated by migration and violence (Katouh, 2022). This synchronizes with current war studies maintaining that "war destabilizes personal identity by replacing pre-war social roles with survival-based identities" (Jetten et al., 2024).

The novel fundamentally described central concept of Social Identity Theory that is war tend to significantly intensified "in-groups" and "out-groups" distinctions (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Throughout the book, there is a clear categorization of people based on political affiliations, ideological loyalties, and ethnic systems, determining social security, acceptance access to resources. War tend to strengthen "in-group" affiliation while increasing intolerance and hostility towards perceived intruders, can be easily seen in the novel when fear dominates social communication, pushing characters towards constant struggle of choosing trustworthy. Salama reflected that *"everyone is afraid of everyone"* elaborated that war tend to erode social structure and cohesion, reshapes relationships through fear-driven mutual identity politics (Katouh, 2022).

A recurring theme that emerged from the critical analysis is the alteration of belonging. "Belonging traditionally refers to the emotional and social experience of acceptance, inclusion, and attachment within a community" (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Moreover, belonging became conditional and lack stability in war zones. Involuntary migration, devastation of communities, and political unrest divert individuals from previous affiliations and spaces. As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow (Katouh, 2022), continuously associated belonging with emotions and values instead of geography. Salama's expressed, *"Home is no longer a place. It exists only in memories,"* captures essence of emotional dislocation experienced by migrated individuals (Katouh, 2022).

Damen et al. (2024) on refugees explained that migrated individuals tend to experience disturbed belonging where nostalgia coexists with struggle to adapt new social structures. Additionally, Ahmadipour and Sordé-Martí (2024) navigated that "refugees develop layered identities shaped simultaneously by trauma, memory, and adaptation". Katouh (2022) examined that belonging is

reshaped according to emotional attachment instead of geographical boundaries. Communities that formed on the foundation of mutual suffering substitute traditional societies, providing emotional cushion to displaced population.

The repetitive symbol of "lemon tree" in the novel acted as a core metaphor for consistency and resilience. In spite of devastated surrounding, symbol of hope and resilience that are lemon trees keep growing. Metaphorically, when communities collapsed, tree represents remaining of belonging. Salama explained: "*As long as the lemon trees grow, there is still something left to hold on to*" (Katouh, 2022). This symbol denoted that the nature of belonging is adaptive elaborated in modern trauma studies, reconstructing emotional attachments through interpersonal communications, and memories.

Katouh (2022), critically examined moral ambiguity in conflict zones. Stable conditions foster moral and legal system, conversely unrest waters this traditional framework, pushing individuals into ethically vague circumstances. Bandura's (1999) theory of moral disengagement explains that "under extreme conditions, individuals justify morally questionable actions through necessity and survival logic". Recurring, Salama experienced morally grey situations. She questioned, "*What kind of person does war turn us into?*" reflects the psychological disturbance of decision-making based on instinct of survival (Katouh, 2022).

One of the essential elements of this study is that instead of absolute and universal morality, war transformed morality into conditional and situational. Traditionally, actions which previously perceived as unethical such as deception and silence are restructured as survival strategies. This validates Haidt's (2012) argument that morality is reshaped by social, political, and emotional circumstances rather than principle of universal morality. *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (Katouh, 2022), significantly portrayed alteration of moral values not merely as moral destruction but also as an adaptation under unstable circumstances.

In addition to this, narrative throughout the novel emphasized that group identity is shaped by morality. Tajfel & Turner (1979), advocated that individuals tend to justify in-group actions while condemning similar actions by out-group. The process of condemning is visible in the violence throughout the novel, individuals' perceived in-group action as defensive and opposing other groups as immoral. Salama's expression: "*They believe they are saving the world, just as we believe we are saving ours*" (Katouh, 2022) illustrates the relationship of morality and perception during war. Kossowska et al. (2023) advocated that war tend to exaggerate moral politicization by linking ethical principles to mutual identity.

Likewise, critical aspect is moral fragmentation which is reflected by emotional imbalance and moral dilemmas, resulted from actions that violate moral values. Unlike physical injuries, moral wounds generate guilt, psychological disturbances, and shame. Repeatedly, Salama's emotional disturbances and internal conflict depicted this exhaustion. She reflects: "*Some wounds stay inside you long after the blood disappears*" (Katouh, 2022). This depicted psychological imbalances due to prolonged exposure to violence, emotional fragmentation and unstable social identity among civilians in conflict zones (Mayer et al., 2024).

The novel does not only present war merely as a condition of devastation, despite sufficient portrayal of suffering. It emphasizes human adaptive nature and resilience. Mutual sufferings tend to create new bonds of belonging. Refugee camps, rehabilitation programs and emotional affiliations replaced collapsed social system. This synchronizes with the contemporary studies, maintaining that "social identity can function as a social cure, where collective belonging provides

psychological resilience against trauma" (Jetten et al., 2024). Significantly, the current study emphasized that war tend to reshape social identity instead of whole destruction of it. Throughout the novel, Salama's identity continuously shift from a medical student to war survivor to violence witness, validating SIT's claim that identity is static and conditional (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Conflict zones pushed individuals into constant struggle of negotiating social identity in uncertain circumstances.

Similarly, *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* (Katouh, 2022) also challenges perceived notion of heroism and victimization. Characters of the novel are neither completely heroic nor absolute victim. Rather than that, they existed in a morally challenging realities shaped by survival instinct, fear, and suffering. This complex structure reinforced present study's argument that moral principles and a sense of belonging in war zones cannot be completely perceived through traditional concept.

To conclude, the analysis demonstrated that the novel present a complete literary representation of role of war in reshaping identity, moral values, and belonging. Using the underpinnings of Social Identity Theory and recent trauma and conflict studies, the current study maintained that war tend to exaggerated identity fragmentation, group distinctions, and ethical divisions. In spite of this fragmentation, individuals keep on reshaping identity and morality through emotional attachment, resilience, and consistency. Ultimately, the "lemon tree" symbolizes human enduring capacity to grow and preserve hope despite massive destruction of war.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Critically, this paper examined the inter relationship between moral values, belonging, and war with particular reference to Katouh's *As Long as the Lemon Trees Grow* by utilizing the lens of Social Identity Theory. The findings of the paper revealed that war is not limited to political and physical destruction but it also disrupted social identity, ethical system, and group affiliation. Tajfel & Turner (1979), expounded that war zones intensifies group divisions, altering social identity into a survival driven identity reshaped by migration, grief, political unrest, and fear.

This paper critically examines that conflict zones transformed morality into situational and conditional acts. Bandura (1999) advocated that "individuals are frequently compelled to make ethically ambiguous decisions in response to violence, insecurity, and survival pressures". Katouh (2022) navigated that moral dilemmas emerged from collapse of social and legal structure not from absence of ethics. Similarly, conditional belonging pushed individuals to reconstruct social identity through shared suffering, emotional attachment, and nostalgia (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Despite these disruptions, the study highlights the resilience of human identity and moral consciousness. Through symbols such as the lemon tree, the novel portrays hope, continuity, and emotional endurance amid destruction (Katouh, 2022). Ultimately, this research concludes that war simultaneously dismantles and reconstructs morality and belonging, revealing the dynamic and adaptive nature of human identity under conditions of conflict.

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