

## METAPHORS OF TRAUMA IN HAYA ABU NASSER'S *AT THE CLIFF OF DEATH*

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the poem "*At the Cliff of Death*" by Haya Abu Nasser to explore how conceptual metaphors are employed to represent collective trauma, identity, and the resilience of Palestinian women. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach and close reading method, the analysis is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and trauma studies (Caruth, 1996; Keller, 2007). The findings reveal that metaphors such as "life is a stage of blood" and "death in a white suit" serve as epistemological tools for articulating extreme experiences within landscapes of structural violence and existential alienation. Metaphors like "I see myself suspended by a noose... / free as a firefly" highlight gendered resistance, challenging patriarchal and colonial narratives. The poem functions not only as an aesthetic expression but also as a political and cultural discourse that reinforces collective memory and amplifies the voices of women in conflict. This study contributes to the scholarship on contemporary Palestinian poetry, trauma metaphors, and the role of gender in narratives of resistance.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, collective trauma, Palestinian poetry, identity, Haya Abu Nasser

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## Introduction

Metaphor plays a pivotal role in shaping human understanding of complex and traumatic experiences, particularly within contexts marked by violence, suffering, and collective trauma. The Conceptual Metaphor Theory, introduced by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), posits that metaphor is not merely a stylistic or rhetorical device, but a fundamental cognitive mechanism through which individuals comprehend abstract or emotional concepts by mapping them onto more tangible, familiar domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In the context of collective trauma—such as that endured by the Palestinian people under prolonged occupation—metaphor functions as both a psychological coping strategy and a linguistic tool of survival, enabling the articulation of pain and the preservation of meaning amidst devastation. **Haya Abu Nasser**, a young Palestinian poet and human rights advocate from Deir-Sneid, Gaza, offers a singular poetic voice shaped by her direct experiences of armed conflict, displacement, and resistance. She holds a bachelor's degree in English Literature and Humanities, and has collaborated with multiple non-governmental organizations in Palestine, particularly those focused on advancing women's and youth rights. Between October 2023 and February 2024, she endured four forced internal displacements within Gaza, ultimately residing in a temporary tent in Rafah. In March 2024, she crossed into Egypt and later relocated to Malaysia to pursue a master's degree in International Relations at Lincoln University College (Abu Nasser, 2024; Kricorian, 2024).

Abu Nasser's poetry, featured in international literary platforms such as *Mizna*, *AGNI*, and *The Normal School*, embodies the convergence of personal trauma and collective endurance. Her work not only chronicles the lived realities of the Gaza 2024 humanitarian catastrophe but also functions as a literary testimony that amplifies marginalized Palestinian voices within global discourse. Through her writing, she bridges the intimate and the political, offering readers a visceral entry point into the existential and sociopolitical dimensions of Palestinian identity and survival.

Palestinian poetry, characterized by its symbolic density and emotional resonance, has long served as a vehicle for expressing the anguish of exile, the yearning for homeland, and the resilience of cultural identity. Its metaphor-rich language bridges the space between private sorrow and public resistance, transforming personal trauma into politicized collective memory. For instance, in Haya Abu Nasser's poem *At the Cliff of Death*, the line "Above the tangled wires at the border, engulfed in a cloud of tears and flames" powerfully renders the traumatized landscape of Gaza—one steeped in violence and despair—yet simultaneously affirms a sense of resistance through its symbolic imagery (Abu Nasser, 2024).

Continuing the poetic tradition pioneered by figures such as Mahmoud Darwish and Fadwa Tuqan, Haya Abu Nasser, a young poet writing amidst the Gaza crisis of 2024, captures the immediacy of contemporary suffering while preserving the literary legacy of her predecessors. Her poem *At the Cliff of Death*, published by *Mizna* on March 8, 2024, employs layered metaphors such as “a stage of blood” and “death in a white suit, arranging a bouquet,” which transform the brutal reality of structural violence into a dense symbolic language (Abu Nasser, 2024). These metaphors are not merely aesthetic flourishes but serve an epistemological function—constituting a cognitive process through which meaning is constructed and communicated in the face of chaos (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Caruth, 1996).

As a Palestinian woman poet, Abu Nasser also introduces a gendered lens that foregrounds the body and voice of the female subject as central sites of suffering and resistance. The metaphor “I see myself suspended by a noose... / free as a firefly” evokes a paradox of restraint and hope, challenging both patriarchal and colonial narratives that often marginalize female subjectivity (Abu Nasser, 2024). Through a close reading of metaphor in this poem, this study seeks to demonstrate how contemporary Palestinian poets deploy symbolic language to construct narratives of trauma, identity, and resilience—narratives that are simultaneously aesthetic, cultural, and political in nature.

## Literature Review

Since the landmark publication of *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), metaphor has been increasingly understood not merely as a decorative linguistic device, but as a fundamental cognitive process that structures human perception and experience. Conceptual Metaphor Theory argues that abstract and emotional domains are often comprehended through more concrete and familiar ones, as exemplified by everyday metaphors such as “ARGUMENT IS WAR” or “TIME IS MONEY” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In the context of trauma studies, metaphor becomes an indispensable tool for articulating experiences that resist straightforward narration. It offers a symbolic structure for translating affective disorientation into forms that invite recognition and resonance.

Sarah Keller (2007) emphasizes this point by stating that metaphor facilitates “the translation of pain into understanding,” thus transforming personal anguish into shared symbolic meaning. Cathy Caruth (1996), in *Unclaimed Experience*, proposes that trauma is not merely the experience of a past event, but a structure of belated and recurring encounters, often accessed through symbolic and narrative forms. Within Palestinian poetry, such theories take on profound significance. In Haya Abu Nasser’s *At the Cliff of Death*, for instance, the metaphor “the boulder of Sisyphus” reflects the cyclical nature of suffering and the weight of historical trauma endured under military occupation (Abu Nasser, 2024; Caruth, 1996).

Palestinian poetic traditions—most notably those shaped by Mahmoud Darwish and Fadwa Tuqan—have long relied on metaphor to articulate the pain of dispossession and exile. In Darwish’s corpus, the land, olive tree, and stone become enduring metaphors of identity and resistance. Echoing this lineage, Ibtisam Barakat (2020 p.32) argues that Palestinian poetry is “an existential act of imagination” that constructs alternative realities through the symbolic possibilities of language. Haya Abu Nasser contributes to this tradition by fusing individual sorrow with collective struggle, as seen in the line “My soul is an immigration ship,” which conjures a sense of both physical and psychological exile (Abu Nasser, 2024).

Moreover, among Palestinian women poets, metaphor emerges as a critical mode of resistance against both colonial and patriarchal erasures. In her poem *Missive for a Departed Soul*, Abu Nasser employs the metaphor “a stray wish meandering around” to convey a persistent sense of loss intertwined with fragile hope (Abu Nasser, 2023b). This thematic continuity across her work underscores the capacity of metaphor to give form to trauma while also constructing a resilient subjectivity. Drawing on feminist postcolonial theory, such as Mohanty’s (2003) critique of colonial discourses that marginalize Third World women, Abu Nasser’s metaphors challenge the erasure of Palestinian women’s voices within both nationalist and colonial frameworks. Integrating insights from Conceptual Metaphor Theory, trauma studies, and postcolonial poetics, this article adopts an interdisciplinary framework to investigate how metaphors in *At the Cliff of Death* function as epistemological and political tools for narrating Palestinian trauma and endurance.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a focus on literary textual analysis, which is particularly appropriate for examining poetry due to its rich use of symbolism, layered meanings, and nuanced language. The analysis centers on Haya Abu Nasser’s poem *At the Cliff of Death* (2024), approached through a combined hermeneutic and semiotic lens. This interpretive strategy facilitates a close examination of the poem’s metaphorical structures, uncovering the cognitive, emotional, and sociopolitical dimensions embedded within its language.

The primary data in this study consist of the poem itself, which is subjected to intensive close reading to identify and interpret salient conceptual metaphors. Secondary data are drawn from scholarly literature on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, trauma studies in literature, and the tradition of Palestinian resistance poetry. These sources provide the theoretical and contextual foundation necessary to support the analysis.

The unit of analysis includes individual poetic lines or images that contain significant conceptual metaphors—especially those related to trauma, identity,

death, and gender. Metaphors were selected based on their cultural significance, emotional resonance, and relevance to themes of trauma and gender in the Palestinian context. Analytical rigor is maintained through theoretical triangulation, by cross-referencing metaphorical findings with key concepts from cognitive metaphor theory and trauma discourse. In addition, historical and cultural contextualization ensures that metaphors are not interpreted in isolation, but rather within the specific sociopolitical realities of Gaza and the broader framework of Palestinian literary expression.

This methodological framework allows for a nuanced exploration of how metaphor functions not only as a linguistic and aesthetic device, but also as a cognitive and political mechanism for articulating trauma and resilience in contemporary Palestinian women's poetry.

## Analysis and Discussion

This section analyzes the central metaphors in *At the Cliff of Death*, revealing how they encapsulate suffering and resilience in the context of Gaza. Through close reading, the poem's metaphorical landscape is examined as a cognitive and cultural system that mediates the articulation of trauma, identity, and endurance. The metaphors identified function not merely as literary devices, but as epistemological frameworks through which the unspeakable is rendered symbolically intelligible.

### 1. "Life is a melancholic play / on a stage of blood"

This metaphor casts life as a tragic spectacle performed upon a stage stained with blood. It portrays Palestinian existence as both a historical tragedy and a public display, implicating the individual in a predetermined role of suffering.

**Conceptual Frame:** *LIFE IS THEATER* – Experience as Spectacle (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

**Extended Insight:** The metaphor critiques passive global spectatorship in response to Palestinian suffering, reinforced by the line "A desperate bird, fleeing the roar of tanks, / beats its wings in frantic protest," expressing the tension between flight and resistance (Abu Nasser, 2024).

### 2. "Footfalls sprint back and forth, / like a bow across violin strings"

Chaos and anguish are rendered as a sorrowful, repetitive melody.

**Conceptual Frame:** *EMOTION IS MUSIC* – Emotions as Audible Rhythms (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

**Extended Insight:** The fusion of bodily movement with sonic imagery evokes the cognitive dissonance of trauma—repetition without resolution, a haunting rhythm that underscores the continuity of war in daily life. The repetitive rhythm of "back and forth" mirrors the cyclical nature of conflict in Gaza, amplifying the auditory metaphor through linguistic structure.

### 3. "People are escaping like shadows; / on their backs, the boulder of Sisyphus"

Human figures are reduced to ephemeral shadows burdened with an eternal weight.

**Conceptual Frame:** *TRAUMA IS A BURDEN* – Repetitive Suffering (Keller, 2007).

**Extended Insight:** The classical allusion to Sisyphus universalizes the Palestinian condition, aligning individual trauma with absurd historical repetition. This echoes Darwish's "the rock of our patience" in *Under Siege* (Darwish, 2002), reinforcing metaphoric continuity across generations.

### 4. "They are climbing the cliff of death"

Death is conceptualized as an arduous ascent toward an inevitable horizon.

**Conceptual Frame:** *DEATH IS A DESTINATION* – Journey to the Existential Limit (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

**Extended Insight:** The upward motion subverts conventional metaphors of death as descent, imbuing the image with dignity and paradoxical resilience, as emphasized in the line "I stride away, abandoning family, memories, home" (Abu Nasser, 2024).

### 5. "Death is extending a hand of redemption"

Death is personified as a savior or a gentle guide.

**Conceptual Frame:** *DEATH IS A PERSON* – Death as Agent (Caruth, 1996).

**Extended Insight:** In the context of ongoing violence, death appears as release, and "redemption" carries spiritual overtones. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this could suggest dissociation as a psychological defense against prolonged trauma (Herman, 1992).

### 6. "I see myself suspended by a noose... / free as a firefly"

A paradox between physical constraint and emotional illumination.

**Conceptual Frame:** *DEATH IS FREEDOM* – Paradoxical Liberation in Constraint (Caruth, 1996).

**Extended Insight:** The juxtaposition of the noose and the firefly renders a powerful symbol of the marginalized yet radiant Palestinian female body. It resists both patriarchal and colonial narratives that seek to silence or erase women's subjectivities.

### 7. "My soul is an immigration ship"

The soul is envisioned as a vessel adrift in exile.

**Conceptual Frame:** *THE SELF IS A JOURNEY* – Displacement as Narrative (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

**Extended Insight:** The ship metaphor reflects both physical diaspora and psychological fragmentation. It resonates with Abu Nasser's earlier image of "a stray wish meandering around" in *Missive for a Departed Soul* (2023b), reinforcing a thematic concern with displacement and identity. This metaphor is particularly poignant given Abu Nasser's experience of four internal displacements in Gaza, embodying the existential drift of a refugee's soul (Kricorian, 2024).

## 8. "Death in a white suit, / arranging a bouquet"

Death is imagined as a groom preparing for a ritual ceremony.

**Conceptual Frame:** *DEATH IS A GROOM* – Ritualized Gendering of Pain (Caruth, 1996).

**Extended Insight:** This metaphor feminizes death and frames the female speaker as a bride to national tragedy. It critiques the aestheticization of martyrdom and the symbolic roles imposed on women within nationalist discourse. The deliberate choice of "white suit" and "bouquet" evokes a wedding's ritualistic imagery, amplifying the gendered critique through precise diction.

## Conclusion

Haya Abu Nasser's *At the Cliff of Death* demonstrates how metaphor functions not merely as a stylistic device, but as a powerful epistemological tool for conveying trauma, death, and the collective identity of the Palestinian people. Through complex and symbolic metaphors such as "a stage of blood," "the boulder of Sisyphus," and "death in a white suit," Abu Nasser constructs a poetic narrative that renders visible the lived reality of suffering under occupation, existential alienation, and the loss of home.

This analysis has shown that the poem's metaphors operate as conceptual frameworks that allow for the cognitive and emotional apprehension of extreme experience. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor elucidates how traumatic and concrete realities are mapped onto symbolic structures, while trauma theory, as articulated by Cathy Caruth and Sarah N. Keller, underscores the role of narrative and imagery in articulating—and, in some cases, working through—what cannot be directly spoken.

As a Palestinian woman poet, Abu Nasser also introduces a distinct gendered lens. The female body and voice in her poetry become a locus of both suffering and resistance, adding an additional layer of meaning to the narrative of poetic defiance. Metaphors such as "my soul is an immigration ship" do not merely suggest forced displacement but express a profound sense of estrangement, longing, and hope from the perspective of women, whose experiences are often marginalized within dominant conflict narratives. This study uniquely highlights how Abu Nasser's metaphors challenge patriarchal and colonial erasure of Palestinian women's voices, contributing to feminist discourses within postcolonial literature.

Thus, *At the Cliff of Death* emerges not only as an aesthetic representation of trauma, but also as a political and cultural discourse that gives voice to Palestinian identity and resilience through poetic language. This study concludes that metaphor in contemporary Palestinian poetry serves a dual function: as a mode of personal

expression and as a collective strategy for preserving memory, responding to violence, and asserting presence within a landscape marked by protracted conflict.

The findings of this analysis point to broader implications for interdisciplinary research bridging cognitive linguistics, postcolonial literature, and gender studies within contemporary Middle Eastern poetry. Future studies may build upon this work by focusing on other Palestinian women poets writing in the wake of the 2024 Gaza war, further enriching the discourse on trauma and resistance through metaphor.

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