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FROM FRAGMENTED SELF TO RECONSTRUCTED IDENTITY: TRAUMATIC MEMORY, RECOVERY, AND POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN NADIA HASHIMI'S SELECTED NOVELS

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Abstract

The present study examines the relationship between traumatic memory, fragmented selfhood, recovery, and posttraumatic growth in Nadia Hashimi's selected novels. It explores how traumatic experiences disrupt continuity of identity and how processes of remembering, confrontation, meaning-making, agency, relationships, and reconnection with the past contribute to the reconstruction of self. Drawing on trauma theory, narrative identity perspectives, and posttraumatic growth theory, the study employs a qualitative interpretive approach to comparatively analyse The Pearl That Broke Its Shell (2014), *When the Moon Is Low* (2015), and *Sparks Like Stars* (2021). *The analysis demonstrates that traumatic memory is represented not merely as an individual psychological disturbance but as an experience shaped by gendered oppression, war, displacement, family separation, cultural memory, and historical violence. Across the narratives, trauma produces fractured identities by disrupting autonomy, belonging, relational continuity, and the coherence of personal memory. Recovery, however, is represented through diverse and non-linear processes rather than as a uniform movement toward resolution. Resistance and self-assertion, adaptation and relational resilience, and confrontation with suppressed memories emerge as significant modes through which fragmented identities are reinterpreted. The findings further indicate that posttraumatic growth is expressed through increased agency, renewed relationships, expanded self-understanding, meaning-making, and reconstructed belonging, while traumatic suffering continues to remain part of the protagonists' identities. The study therefore argues that Hashimi represents identity reconstruction as an ongoing negotiation with the past rather than a return to a pre-traumatic self. By bringing traumatic memory, identity fragmentation, recovery, and posttraumatic growth into a comparative*

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framework, the study demonstrates how literary narratives can represent the complex processes through which individuals reinterpret traumatic histories and develop new forms of self-understanding.

1. Introduction

Trauma constitutes a profound disruption of an individual's relationship with memory, selfhood, and continuity. Experiences of war, political violence, forced displacement, bereavement, gender-based oppression, and childhood adversity may not remain confined to the moment in which they occur; rather, they can continue to shape how individuals remember the past, interpret the present, and imagine the future. Recent research has particularly emphasized the close relationship between trauma and autobiographical memory because personal memory provides an important basis for constructing a coherent sense of self across time. A systematic review by Borrelli et al. (2024) demonstrated that childhood trauma is associated with significant alterations in autobiographical memory, including difficulties in the organization and specificity of personal memories. Such findings are important for literary studies because they suggest that traumatic experience can be examined not only as an event represented within a narrative but also as a force that reorganizes the subject's relationship with personal history and identity.

The relationship between trauma and identity becomes especially significant when traumatic experience disrupts an individual's previously established understanding of who they are. Identity is not merely a collection of stable characteristics; it is continuously organized through memories, relationships, social roles, values, and interpretations of significant life experiences. Recent research on narrative identity has reinforced the importance of life stories in constructing continuity and meaning around difficult experiences. Turner et al. (2024), in a cross-cultural investigation of narrative identity, demonstrated that individuals organize difficult life events within broader life narratives through culturally situated patterns of interpretation. Similarly, Cowan and Lind (2024) identified disturbances in narrative identity as an important dimension of difficulties involving the self, emphasizing the role of narrative organization in understanding identity disruption. These developments make narrative identity particularly productive for literary analysis because fictional characters can be examined as subjects whose identities are repeatedly reconstructed through their relationships with memory, trauma, social expectations, and changing circumstances.

Trauma, however, does not necessarily result only in psychological fragmentation. It has been observed that, contemporary trauma research has increasingly examined the possibility of positive psychological transformation following severe adversity. The concept of post traumatic growth (PTG) describes positive changes that may emerge through an individual's struggle with highly challenging circumstances. Recent scholarship has emphasized that PTG should not be interpreted as a simple replacement of suffering with happiness or as evidence that trauma is inherently beneficial. Rather, growth may involve a changed understanding of the self, stronger relationships, recognition of new possibilities, greater appreciation of life, and the reconstruction of meaning. A systematic review by Gendre et al. (2025) showed that trajectories of posttraumatic growth are heterogeneous and may involve different patterns of development rather than a uniform progression. Adler and Schwaba (2024) have similarly called for greater

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conceptual precision in PTG research, particularly in distinguishing genuine transformation from assumptions that positive change necessarily follows trauma.

The relationship between traumatic suffering and posttraumatic growth is particularly important in contexts of forced displacement and collective violence. Refugees and internally displaced persons frequently experience multiple and cumulative forms of trauma associated with conflict, loss, displacement, separation, and uncertainty. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Pop et al. (2025) found evidence of posttraumatic growth among refugees and internally displaced populations while also reporting substantial heterogeneity in the extent and forms of growth. Sultani et al. (2024) likewise demonstrated that refugee populations can experience psychological development alongside trauma-related difficulties. More recently, Jindal et al. (2026) identified posttraumatic growth as an increasingly important area of inquiry in relation to armed-conflict-induced trauma, while noting continuing conceptual and methodological challenges in explaining how growth develops within conflict-affected populations. These findings are particularly relevant to literature concerned with Afghanistan, where war, political upheaval, forced migration, gendered violence, and displacement constitute recurring historical and cultural contexts.

Nadia Hashimi's fiction provides a significant literary site for examining these interconnected processes. As an Afghan-American novelist, Hashimi repeatedly situates women's lives within histories of political violence, patriarchal restrictions, displacement, migration, cultural conflict, and changing conceptions of selfhood. Her fiction does not simply represent Afghan women as passive subjects of historical violence; instead, it frequently depicts characters negotiating imposed identities, recovering suppressed histories, confronting traumatic memories, and seeking forms of agency within restrictive social structures. Consequently, Hashimi's fiction offers an appropriate corpus for examining the relationship between traumatic memory and identity reconstruction. Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014) provides an important representation of fractured and negotiated female identity through the intertwined narratives of Rahima and Shekiba. The practice of *bacha posh*, through which girls temporarily assume socially recognized male identities, creates a particularly complex relationship between gender, identity, agency, and belonging. Existing scholarship has examined the novel in relation to women's identity and gendered oppression, demonstrating that the transformation of female identity is central to Hashimi's representation of Afghan women's experiences. Wahedi (2022), for example, examined the relationship between women's identity and the practice of *bacha posh*, while Zafar (2025) situated Hashimi's representation of Afghan women within broader debates concerning literary tropes, gender, and Western representations of Afghanistan.

One Half from the East (2016) further complicates the relationship between gender, identity, and social expectations through the experience of Obayda, whose temporary transformation into a boy generates new possibilities for mobility and agency while simultaneously producing uncertainty about identity and belonging. The novel is therefore useful for examining identity not as a fixed psychological category but as a socially mediated and continually negotiated construction. Its representation of gender transformation provides an important dimension to a broader investigation of how Hashimi's protagonists reconstruct their understanding of selfhood under conditions in which social identities are imposed, altered, or contested. The

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relationship between traumatic memory and identity becomes particularly explicit in *Sparks Like Stars* (2021). The novel follows Sitara Zamani, a survivor of the violent political upheaval that destroys her childhood world in Afghanistan and forces her into a new life in the United States under the name Aryana. Her adult life is consequently shaped by a past that has not been completely integrated into her present identity. Torky (2022) has examined the novel through the framework of childhood trauma, emphasizing the continuing consequences of Sitara's buried traumatic memories and her eventual confrontation with the past. Yasmin and Ahmad (2023), meanwhile, examined the protagonist's cultural hybridity and quest for self-identity, demonstrating the importance of memory, migration, and belonging in Hashimi's construction of the self. More recent scholarship on Hashimi has also connected her fiction with trauma, resilience, displacement, and the experiences of Afghan women (Qazi & Ahmad Saeed, 2024).

These novels provide a productive textual continuum for investigating fragmented identity, traumatic memory, recovery, and reconstruction. Yet the existing scholarship has generally approached these concerns through separate conceptual lenses, including feminism, gender inequality, cultural hybridity, displacement, trauma, resistance, and resilience. What remains insufficiently examined is the interrelationship among these processes across Hashimi's selected novels, particularly the movement from traumatic memory and identity disruption toward recovery and posttraumatic growth. The present study addresses this gap by reading Hashimi's selected novels as narratives in which the self is first destabilized by traumatic experience and subsequently reconstructed through processes of remembering, confronting, negotiating, meaning-making, agency, and renewed orientation toward the future. The study therefore does not assume that trauma inevitably produces growth or that recovery represents a complete return to a pre-traumatic identity. Instead, it examines the possibility of transformation within continuing experiences of loss, memory, displacement, and cultural conflict. This distinction is consistent with contemporary PTG research, which recognizes that psychological distress and perceived growth may coexist and that posttraumatic development can follow complex and heterogeneous trajectories (Fletcher et al., 2023; Gendre et al., 2025). Accordingly, the present study conceptualizes the movement from a "fragmented self" to a "reconstructed identity" as a literary process of negotiation rather than a linear psychological progression.

1.1 Background of the Study

Trauma studies have increasingly moved beyond an exclusive emphasis on pathological consequences toward more complex understandings of memory, identity, meaning, recovery, and transformation. This development is particularly relevant to literary studies because literary narratives frequently represent traumatic experience through fragmented chronology, recurring memories, silence, repetition, retrospective narration, identity shifts, and the juxtaposition of past and present. The relationship between trauma and autobiographical memory is especially important because personal memories contribute to a sense of continuity between past and present. Borrelli et al. (2024), in a systematic review of research on childhood trauma and autobiographical memory, identified substantial relationships between traumatic experiences and the organization, specificity, and accessibility of autobiographical memories. Such findings provide an empirical basis for examining how traumatic memory can disturb the continuity through which individuals understand themselves. Memory is consequently not merely a

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repository of past events but an important component of identity construction. Recent narrative-identity research has demonstrated that individuals interpret difficult experiences through broader life stories that connect past events with present identities and anticipated futures. Turner et al. (2024), examining narrative identity across Japan, Denmark, Israel, and the United States, found that individuals construct culturally situated narratives around difficult life experiences. Their findings are significant for the present study because Hashimi's protagonists similarly negotiate personal experiences within broader cultural and historical contexts. Their identities are shaped not only by individual trauma but also by Afghanistan's political history, gender structures, migration, family relationships, and the cultural meanings attached to home and belonging.

The reconstruction of identity following trauma is therefore closely connected to meaning-making. Meaning-making involves attempts to interpret disruptive experiences and incorporate them into an individual's broader understanding of life. Almeida et al. (2022), through a systematic review and meta-analysis, identified a significant relationship between meaning in life, meaning-making, and posttraumatic growth. More recent work has continued to emphasize meaning as a central mechanism in posttraumatic adaptation. Mutuyimana et al. (2024), for example, reviewed empirical research on meaning in life and posttraumatic outcomes and highlighted the relevance of meaning-related processes in responses to trauma. For literary analysis, this perspective makes it possible to examine how characters reinterpret their histories and how changes in interpretation contribute to changing conceptions of selfhood.

Narrative identity is particularly relevant because recovery may involve the reconstruction of the story through which an individual understands the self. Yatsenko and Darvishov (2023) identified narrative identity as an important but comparatively underdeveloped perspective within posttraumatic-growth research and highlighted agency and redemption as recurring narrative patterns associated with growth. Their review suggests that posttraumatic growth can be examined through changes in the way individuals narrate their lives rather than solely through conventional psychological measures. This approach is especially appropriate for literary studies because novels provide sustained representations of characters' memories, self-reflections, relationships, choices, and changing interpretations of their past. At the same time, contemporary scholarship cautions against presenting posttraumatic growth as an automatic or universally positive consequence of trauma. Fletcher et al. (2023), in a systematic review of empirical patterns of posttraumatic stress and growth, demonstrated that distress and growth can coexist and that the relationship between the two is complex. Gendre et al. (2025) similarly identified heterogeneous trajectories of PTG and noted continuing debates concerning the distinction between constructive growth and potentially illusory perceptions of growth. Adler and Schwaba (2024) further argued for conceptual refinement in PTG research. These findings are methodologically important for the present literary study because they discourage a simplistic reading in which characters are assumed to move inevitably from suffering to recovery and then to complete psychological transformation.

The distinction becomes even more important in literature representing refugees, displaced communities, and survivors of armed conflict. Pop et al. (2025) synthesized research on PTG among refugees and internally displaced persons and found both evidence of growth and

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considerable variation across individuals and contexts. Similarly, Sultani et al. (2024) reported that refugee populations can experience forms of positive psychological development despite substantial exposure to traumatic circumstances. Jindal et al. (2026) have more specifically examined PTG following armed conflict-induced trauma and identified the need for further research into the mechanisms and trajectories through which growth may occur. These studies establish an important contemporary context for reading Afghan literary narratives, where personal histories of trauma frequently intersect with collective histories of conflict and displacement.

Nadia Hashimi's novels are particularly suitable for such an inquiry because they repeatedly connect female subjectivity with historical and social disruption. Her characters inhabit spaces shaped by war, patriarchy, migration, family expectations, cultural memory, and contested identities. Recent literary criticism has confirmed the continuing relevance of these concerns. Qazi and Ahmad Saeed (2024) examined trauma and resilience in the works of Afghan women writers, including Hashimi, and identified the interaction between personal and collective trauma within Afghan women's narratives. Zafar (2025) examined *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* in relation to representations of Afghan women and argued that literary constructions of Afghan femininity require critical attention to recurring narrative tropes and representational assumptions. Ahuja (2025) further examined *When the Moon Is Low* through displacement, intergenerational trauma, and maternal identity, demonstrating the continuing critical interest in Hashimi's representation of trauma and identity. Within this body of scholarship, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, *One Half from the East*, and *Sparks Like Stars* offer particularly productive points of comparison because they present different configurations of identity disruption and reconstruction. The first foregrounds gendered identity and the *bacha posh* practice; the second explores the instability produced by gender transformation and changing social roles; and the third most directly connects childhood political violence with traumatic memory, migration, and adult identity. Their juxtaposition permits an examination of trauma and reconstruction across different forms of identity disruption rather than limiting the investigation to a single traumatic event or protagonist.

1.2 Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study emerges from a discernible gap between the growing body of research on trauma and posttraumatic growth and the comparatively limited literary scholarship that examines these processes as an interconnected trajectory within Nadia Hashimi's fiction. Existing studies have established the importance of trauma, gender, identity, resilience, displacement, and cultural hybridity in Hashimi's novels. Torky (2022), for instance, foregrounded childhood trauma and the persistence of buried memories in *Sparks Like Stars*, while Yasmin and Ahmad (2023) examined cultural hybridity and self-identity in the same novel. Studies of *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* have similarly addressed gender, identity, and women's oppression (Wahedi, 2022; Zafar, 2025). Qazi and Ahmad Saeed (2024) extended the discussion to trauma and resilience in Afghan women's writing. However, these studies have not sufficiently integrated traumatic memory, identity fragmentation, recovery, and posttraumatic growth within a single comparative analytical framework.

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The gap is theoretically significant because trauma cannot be adequately understood only through its destructive consequences. Contemporary scholarship indicates that trauma can affect autobiographical memory and narrative identity while also creating conditions in which individuals engage in meaning-making and reconstruct aspects of the self (Borrelli et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2024). At the same time, research on posttraumatic growth demonstrates that positive transformation is neither inevitable nor necessarily linear (Adler & Schwaba, 2024; Fletcher et al., 2023; Gendre et al., 2025). A literary study that places these dimensions in dialogue can therefore provide a more nuanced account of characters who remain marked by traumatic histories while developing new forms of agency, relational connection, self-understanding, and future orientation. The study is also warranted by the particular historical and cultural contexts represented in Hashimi's fiction. Afghan women in these narratives encounter trauma not as an isolated psychological phenomenon but within structures of war, political violence, patriarchy, displacement, migration, family separation, and cultural expectation. The interaction between personal and collective dimensions of trauma is especially important in literary representations of Afghanistan because individual identity frequently becomes entangled with historical memory and cultural belonging. Recent research on collective violence and posttraumatic growth has emphasized that survivors may draw on personal and social strengths while negotiating the consequences of collective violence (Brooks et al., 2025). This provides a useful conceptual basis for examining Hashimi's characters without reducing their experiences either to victimhood or to uncomplicated narratives of resilience.

The study consequently adopts the concept of reconstructed identity as an analytical endpoint rather than assuming a return to the pre-traumatic self. Reconstruction implies that the characters' identities have been altered by what they have experienced and that recovery involves negotiating the past rather than simply erasing it. The emphasis on "fragmented self" therefore refers to textual representations of disrupted continuity, conflicting identities, suppressed or intrusive memories, displacement, and fractured belonging, whereas "reconstructed identity" refers to emerging forms of self-understanding, agency, meaning, relational connection, and future orientation. The current study is thus designed to make a dual contribution. At the level of literary scholarship, it extends critical discussion of Hashimi beyond isolated readings of gender, trauma, resistance, or cultural identity toward an integrated account of transformation. At the theoretical level, it brings recent research on autobiographical memory, narrative identity, recovery, and posttraumatic growth into dialogue with contemporary Afghan diasporic fiction. The study does not claim that trauma necessarily produces growth; instead, it investigates how Hashimi's narratives represent the difficult, uneven, and sometimes unresolved processes through which traumatic experience may be incorporated into a transformed sense of self.

1.3 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Nadia Hashimi represent traumatic memory and its disruption of self-continuity in the selected novels?

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2. How do traumatic memories shape the protagonists' experiences of fragmented, conflicted, or unstable identities?
3. How do the selected novels represent processes of recovery through remembering, confronting, meaning-making, agency, relationships, and reconnection with the past?
4. In what ways do the protagonists' experiences of trauma and recovery contribute to forms of posttraumatic growth and reconstructed identity?
5. How do gender, displacement, cultural memory, and belonging mediate the relationship between traumatic experience and identity reconstruction in the selected novels?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it develops an integrated framework for interpreting the relationship between trauma, memory, identity, recovery, and posttraumatic growth in contemporary Afghan diasporic fiction. Rather than treating traumatic experience as a fixed condition, it examines how trauma continues to operate through memory and how characters negotiate its consequences through processes of interpretation and reconstruction. This approach corresponds with recent research showing that autobiographical memory is closely associated with identity and that traumatic experiences can alter the organization of personal memory (Borrelli et al., 2024). The study also contributes to literary applications of narrative identity theory. Recent research demonstrates that difficult life experiences are interpreted within broader narrative structures through which individuals construct continuity, agency, and meaning (Turner et al., 2024).

A further contribution concerns the literary study of posttraumatic growth. Contemporary research increasingly recognizes that growth may coexist with continuing distress and that posttraumatic trajectories are heterogeneous rather than linear (Fletcher et al., 2023; Gendre et al., 2025). This study brings that complexity into literary interpretation by examining growth through textual representations of agency, self-understanding, relationships, meaning-making, new possibilities, and altered perceptions of life. It therefore avoids the reductive assumption that recovery requires complete psychological restoration or that suffering automatically culminates in positive transformation. The study is also significant for scholarship on Afghan women's literature. Hashimi's novels provide representations of women whose identities are shaped by war, patriarchy, displacement, migration, and cultural memory. Recent scholarship has identified trauma, resilience, and identity as recurring dimensions of Afghan women's narratives (Qazi & Ahmad Saeed, 2024). By examining these dimensions through the additional concepts of recovery and posttraumatic growth, the present study broadens the critical discussion from representations of oppression and survival toward the complex reconstruction of subjectivity after traumatic disruption.

Finally, the study contributes to contemporary literary trauma studies by shifting analytical attention from the event of trauma to the afterlife of trauma. The central concern is not simply what traumatic experiences do to characters but how those experiences continue through memory, reshape identity, and become subject to processes of reinterpretation and reconstruction. The movement from fragmented self to reconstructed identity therefore provides a conceptual structure for examining how Hashimi's fiction represents the possibility

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of living with, rather than simply escaping, a traumatic past. In this sense, the study positions recovery and posttraumatic growth as contested, uneven, and narratively mediated processes through which the self may be reorganized after profound disruption.

2. Review of the Related Literature

Recent research provides a strong starting point for understanding the relationship between traumatic experience and the disruption of autobiographical memory. Borrelli et al. (2024) demonstrate that childhood trauma can alter the specificity and organization of autobiographical memories, suggesting that traumatic experience may affect not only what is remembered but also how personal experience is subsequently organized in memory. This finding is important for the present study because a fragmented sense of self can be approached through the fragmentation, suppression, or reorganization of significant memories. However, Borrelli et al. focus primarily on memory processes, whereas the present study moves beyond memory to examine how remembered trauma becomes part of a changing sense of identity. In this respect, their findings establish the psychological foundation for the first part of the proposed trajectory but do not address the later movement toward identity reconstruction.

Table 1. Critical reviews of the previous researches

Author(s) & Year	Topic	Key Findings	Contribution to the Present Study
Borrelli et al. (2024)	Trauma and autobiographical memory	Traumatic experiences were associated with disruptions in the specificity and organization of autobiographical memories, particularly in cases of childhood trauma.	Establishes a basis for examining traumatic memory as a source of fragmented selfhood in Hashimi's fiction.
Gehrt et al. (2024)	Narrative identity and autobiographical memory	Narrative identity is closely connected with the way individuals organize and interpret remembered life experiences; different approaches to assessing narrative identity capture different dimensions of self-construction.	Supports reading Hashimi's protagonists' changing identities through narrative reconstruction of the past rather than as fixed identities.
Sultani et al. (2024)	Trauma, displacement, and posttraumatic growth	Refugees may develop positive changes through meaning-making, social relationships, coping, storytelling, and spiritual resources despite continuing trauma-related difficulties.	Provides a strong conceptual foundation for examining recovery and growth within displacement, a recurring context in Hashimi's novels.

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Turner et al. (2024)	Narrative identity and difficult life experiences	Difficult experiences are incorporated into life narratives through culturally shaped processes of interpretation, continuity, and meaning-making.	Supports a culturally situated reading of identity reconstruction in Afghan and diasporic contexts.
Vukčević Marković et al. (2025)	Posttraumatic growth among refugees	Growth was associated with changes in self-perception, relationships, and broader perspectives on life, demonstrating that recovery can involve multiple dimensions of personal transformation.	Provides useful analytical dimensions for identifying reconstructed identity and posttraumatic growth in literary characters.
Pop et al. (2025)	Posttraumatic growth among refugees and displaced populations	Posttraumatic growth was evident among displaced populations, although its expression varied considerably according to personal, psychological, social, and cultural circumstances.	Supports treating growth in Hashimi as context-dependent rather than universal or linear, particularly in relation to migration and displacement.
Brooks et al. (2025)	Collective violence and posttraumatic growth	Meaning-making, interpersonal resources, and personal strengths were associated with positive adaptation following collective violence.	Extends the analysis from individual trauma to collective histories of war and violence represented in Hashimi's fiction.
Jernslett et al. (2025)	Trauma and posttraumatic growth among young survivors	Trauma-related distress and posttraumatic growth were not mutually exclusive; their relationship was complex and varied across contexts.	Prevents a simplistic interpretation of Hashimi's characters in which recovery is equated with the disappearance of trauma.
Gendre et al. (2025)	Nature and interpretation of posttraumatic growth	Positive changes following trauma require careful interpretation because perceived growth does not necessarily represent complete psychological transformation.	Encourages the present study to identify textual evidence of transformation rather than automatically labelling every positive development as PTG.
Fayaz et al. (2026)	Posttraumatic growth following armed conflict	Research indicates that positive transformation may follow conflict-related trauma,	Directly connects the study's framework with war-related trauma,

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		although the processes through which such growth develops remain complex and insufficiently understood.	making it particularly relevant to Hashimi's Afghan narratives.
Charles (2025)	Identity repair after conflict-related childhood trauma	Young survivors reconstructed identity through different narrative pathways involving survival, learning, advocacy, and renewed social engagement; these pathways were not necessarily sequential.	Strongly supports the present study's conception of identity reconstruction as an uneven narrative process rather than a fixed sequence.
Ahuja (2025)	Displacement, trauma, and identity in *When the Moon Is Low*	Displacement was represented as producing psychological, familial, cultural, and social ruptures, while identity reconstruction emerged through the protagonist's negotiation of displacement and motherhood.	Demonstrates that trauma and identity reconstruction have already been examined in one Hashimi novel, but not through a comparative trauma–recovery–PTG framework.
Torky (2022)	Childhood trauma and buried memory in *Sparks Like Stars*	The protagonist's suppressed childhood trauma remained connected to her adult identity, with confrontation with the past becoming important to her movement toward healing.	Establishes an existing trauma reading of *Sparks Like Stars* and leaves scope for examining the broader progression from traumatic memory to reconstructed identity and PTG.

The connection between memory and identity becomes clearer in Gehrt et al. (2024), who examine narrative identity as the way individuals narrate their lived and remembered past. Their work draws attention to the relationship between remembered experience and the construction of the self, although their primary concern is with different approaches to assessing narrative identity rather than with traumatic recovery itself. When read alongside Borrelli et al. (2024), the two studies establish an important conceptual relationship: trauma may disturb autobiographical memory, while the organization and interpretation of remembered experience contributes to the construction of identity. The present study extends this relationship into literary analysis by asking how Hashimi's protagonists negotiate traumatic memories and transform their understanding of themselves. Thus, the proposed study does not treat memory as merely a record of trauma but as an active element in the reconstruction of selfhood. This connection is further strengthened by Turner et al. (2024), whose cross cultural study demonstrates that people narrate difficult life experiences within culturally situated

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understandings of the self. Their analysis is especially relevant because narrative identity involves reconstructing the past while also imagining the future, allowing difficult experiences to acquire meaning within a broader life story. Unlike studies that treat traumatic memory primarily as an individual psychological process, this work draws attention to cultural context. When considered together with Gehrt et al. (2024), it suggests that identity reconstruction cannot be separated from the cultural frameworks through which individuals interpret their experiences. This is particularly significant for Hashimi's Afghan characters, whose identities are shaped simultaneously by family, gender, religion, national history, migration, and war. The present study therefore brings together two dimensions that are often considered separately: the reconstruction of traumatic memory and the cultural reconstruction of identity. The literature on refugees then shifts the discussion from memory and identity toward recovery. Sultani et al. (2024) show refugees may experience positive psychological change even while continuing to live with the consequences of trauma. Their findings associate posttraumatic growth with meaning making, coping, religious resources, storytelling, helping others, and community based processes. This complements the earlier work on narrative identity because storytelling is not simply a means of recounting suffering; it can also become a way of interpreting suffering and developing a different relationship with the past. Yet Sultani et al. examine refugee experiences broadly, whereas the present study investigates how such processes are represented through fictional characters and narrative structures. Their work therefore provides the conceptual basis for examining recovery without assuming that recovery means the complete disappearance of trauma.

This point is reinforced by Vukčević Marković et al. (2025), whose study of refugees in transit shows that posttraumatic growth can occur even under continuing uncertainty and highly stressful conditions. This finding is particularly useful when read alongside Sultani et al. (2024). Both studies reject an understanding of growth as something that occurs only after adversity has completely ended. The difference lies in their contexts: the earlier review identifies several routes through which refugees may find meaning and strength, whereas the later study draws attention to growth within an unstable transitional environment. Together, they suggest that recovery should be understood as a process that can develop alongside continuing vulnerability. This perspective fits Hashimi's narratives, where displacement does not necessarily end when characters leave a site of violence and where psychological and social consequences continue across geographical borders. The same pattern becomes more complex in Pop et al. (2025), which emphasizes that posttraumatic growth among refugees and displaced populations varies according to psychological, social, personal, and cultural circumstances. This contextual emphasis is consistent with Sultani et al. (2024) and Vukčević Marković et al. (2025), but it places greater emphasis on variation rather than on a common pathway. The implication for the present study is important: Hashimi's characters should not be expected to pass through identical stages of trauma, recovery, and growth. Their transformations need to be interpreted in relation to the particular histories, relationships, cultural pressures, and forms of displacement represented in each novel.

The literature becomes even more relevant to Hashimi's conflict narratives when attention shifts from individual trauma to collective violence. Brooks et al. (2025) demonstrate that responses to collective violence can involve meaning making, personal strengths, interpersonal

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resources, and wider social and ecological conditions. Their findings also indicate that relationships between particular resources and perceived growth are not uniformly positive across contexts. This broadens the discussion developed by refugee studies by showing that trauma cannot always be separated from the social and political environments in which it occurs. For the present study, this distinction matters because Hashimi's characters experience trauma not simply as isolated personal events but within histories of war, political oppression, displacement, and disrupted communities. The proposed analysis can therefore connect personal reconstruction with the larger historical conditions surrounding it. At the same time, Jernslett et al. (2025) complicate any straightforward assumption that trauma and growth represent opposite ends of a single continuum. Their meta analytic findings indicate a modest positive relationship between posttraumatic stress symptoms and posttraumatic growth among young people, with the relationship varying according to the level of distress and other contextual factors. This complements the refugee studies while adding an important qualification: continuing distress does not necessarily invalidate evidence of growth. Consequently, the present study should not interpret suffering, recurring memories, fear, or emotional vulnerability as evidence that a character has failed to recover. Instead, traumatic residue and emerging growth may coexist within the same character and even within the same narrative.

Gendre et al. (2025) introduce a further caution by questioning whether all reported posttraumatic growth represents genuine psychological transformation. Their review distinguishes constructive forms of change from forms of perceived or potentially illusory growth and therefore calls for greater care in interpreting claims of positive transformation. This position complements Jernslett et al. (2025), but the two studies approach the issue differently. Jernslett et al. demonstrate that distress and growth can coexist, whereas Gendre et al. ask whether apparent growth should always be accepted as evidence of actual transformation. Together, they provide an important methodological principle for the present literary study: PTG should not be assigned to a character simply because the narrative ends with hope, survival, or positive change. The analysis must identify textual evidence of altered self perception, relationships, values, agency, or life orientation. The relevance of this approach becomes particularly strong in Fayaz et al. (2026), which focuses specifically on posttraumatic growth following armed conflict. The study recognizes the possibility of positive transformation after conflict while also emphasizing the complexity of the processes through which such transformation develops. Compared with the broader refugee literature, this work provides a closer conceptual connection to Hashimi's representation of Afghanistan because armed conflict forms part of the historical conditions underlying several of her narratives. Yet the psychological research remains concerned with lived human experience, while the present study examines how literary narratives construct and represent that experience. This distinction creates an opportunity to bring conflict related trauma research into conversation with literary representations of memory, recovery, and identity.

A particularly useful development is found in Charles (2026), published online in 2025, which examines identity repair among former child soldiers through life narratives. The study identifies several different forms of self reconstruction and, importantly, shows that these pathways are not necessarily sequential. This finding brings together several strands of the

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preceding literature. It supports the memory based understanding of identity associated with Borrelli et al. and Gehrt et al., the culturally situated narrative identity proposed by Turner et al., and the non linear understanding of recovery emerging from the refugee and PTG literature. It also provides an important refinement to the present study's conceptual trajectory. The movement from traumatic memory toward reconstructed identity can be used as an analytical framework, but it should not be imposed on the novels as a fixed sequence. Characters may return to earlier memories, experience renewed distress after apparent recovery, or develop new forms of identity without completely resolving their trauma. Hashimi specific research provides a more direct literary point of comparison. Ahuja (2025) examines *When the Moon Is Low* through displacement, intergenerational trauma, maternal identity, and identity reconstruction. The study interprets trauma as extending beyond individual suffering into familial, cultural, and social ruptures and links the protagonist's changing identity to her experience of displacement. This substantially overlaps with the present study in its attention to trauma, displacement, and identity, but its focus remains on one novel and does not develop a comparative account of posttraumatic growth across Hashimi's fiction. It therefore provides an important starting point while leaving open the question of whether similar or contrasting patterns of memory, recovery, and identity reconstruction emerge across several novels.

Similarly, Torky's (2022) reading of *Sparks Like Stars* connects buried childhood trauma with the protagonist's adult identity and considers confrontation with the past as part of movement toward healing. Its focus on suppressed memory is consistent with Borrelli et al.'s (2024) broader account of the relationship between childhood trauma and autobiographical memory, while its attention to healing moves toward the recovery concerns addressed more extensively by Sultani et al. (2024) and later PTG research. The difference is that the earlier literary study concentrates on trauma and healing within a single Hashimi novel, whereas the present study brings memory, recovery, PTG, and identity reconstruction together across a selected corpus. Viewed collectively, these studies produce a clear but deliberately non linear pattern. Research on trauma and autobiographical memory establishes that traumatic experience can disturb the organization of personal recollection. Research on narrative identity then shows that remembered experience is involved in the continuing construction of the self. Studies of refugees and displaced populations extend this discussion by demonstrating that trauma can coexist with meaning making, renewed relationships, changed perspectives, and other forms of growth. Research on collective violence places these processes within wider social and historical conditions, while recent work on PTG cautions that distress and growth may coexist and that apparent growth must be interpreted carefully.

The central gap therefore does not lie in the absence of research on trauma, identity, refugees, or PTG individually. Rather, these strands have generally been examined separately, while Hashimi specific criticism has concentrated on particular novels and particular dimensions of trauma or displacement. Ahuja's (2025) study, for example, addresses identity reconstruction in *When the Moon Is Low*, while Torky's work examines buried childhood trauma in *Sparks Like Stars*. What remains insufficiently examined is how traumatic memory, fractured identity, recovery, meaning making, and posttraumatic growth interact across a selected group of Hashimi's novels.

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The present study addresses this space by treating fragmented selfhood, traumatic memory, recovery, posttraumatic growth, and reconstructed identity as interconnected but non sequential dimensions of character development. Rather than assuming that trauma inevitably produces growth, the study will examine when and how characters reinterpret traumatic experience, what enables or obstructs their recovery, and whether their later sense of self can reasonably be understood as reconstructed rather than simply restored. This approach also allows the analysis to retain the continuing presence of trauma instead of presenting recovery as a complete return to psychological stability. In this way, the study brings together the psychological understanding of traumatic memory and PTG with the literary analysis of narrative identity, while remaining attentive to the particular historical, cultural, familial, and migratory contexts that shape Hashimi's fiction.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study adopts an exploratory qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist philosophical orientation. This approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret how traumatic experience, memory, identity disruption, recovery, and posttraumatic growth are constructed and represented through literary narratives rather than to measure these phenomena statistically. The corpus comprises three novels selected purposively from Nadia Hashimi's fictional works: *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), *When the Moon Is Low* (2015), and *Sparks Like Stars* (2021). The selection is criterion based because these novels provide sufficiently distinct yet interconnected representations of gendered oppression, war, displacement, childhood trauma, traumatic memory, identity disruption, recovery, and subsequent forms of personal transformation. Together, they provide a meaningful textual range for examining the movement from fragmented selfhood toward reconstructed identity across different configurations of trauma. The study employs qualitative content analysis to examine textual and contextual evidence. The analysis is informed by trauma theory, posttraumatic stress perspectives, and posttraumatic growth theory, while remaining attentive to the literary construction of character, memory, identity, relationships, and historical context. The textual analysis focuses on recurring representations of traumatic experience, traumatic memory, fragmented selfhood, recovery and transformation, and potential dimensions of posttraumatic growth. Rather than assuming that these dimensions occur in a fixed sequence, the study interprets their relationships within and across the three novels, recognizing that recovery may be uneven, recurrent, or accompanied by continuing trauma. The analysis therefore seeks to establish how Hashimi represents the reconstruction of identity through confrontation with the past, meaning making, agency, relational change, and renewed understandings of self.

Table 2. Content Analytical Framework

Selected Novel	Year	Trauma Configuration	Fragmented Self	Recovery / Transformation	Potential PTG Dimension
The Pearl That Broke Its	2014	Gendered oppression, forced marriage, social	Suppressed identity, loss of autonomy, social	Resistance, self assertion, agency, reclamation of	Personal agency, empowerment, reconstructed

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Shell		exclusion, intergenerational trauma	and psychological marginalization	voice	identity
When the Moon Is Low	2015	War, bereavement, forced migration, displacement, family separation	Loss of home, security, social identity, and familial stability	Adaptation to displacement, maternal resilience, rebuilding family life	Renewed purpose, relational strength, resilience, reconstructed belonging
Sparks Like Stars	2021	Childhood war trauma, family massacre, exile, traumatic memory	Fragmented childhood identity, suppressed memories, divided Afghan American identity	Return to Kabul, confrontation with the past, memory recovery, meaning making	Identity reconstruction, reconciliation, renewed understanding of self and past

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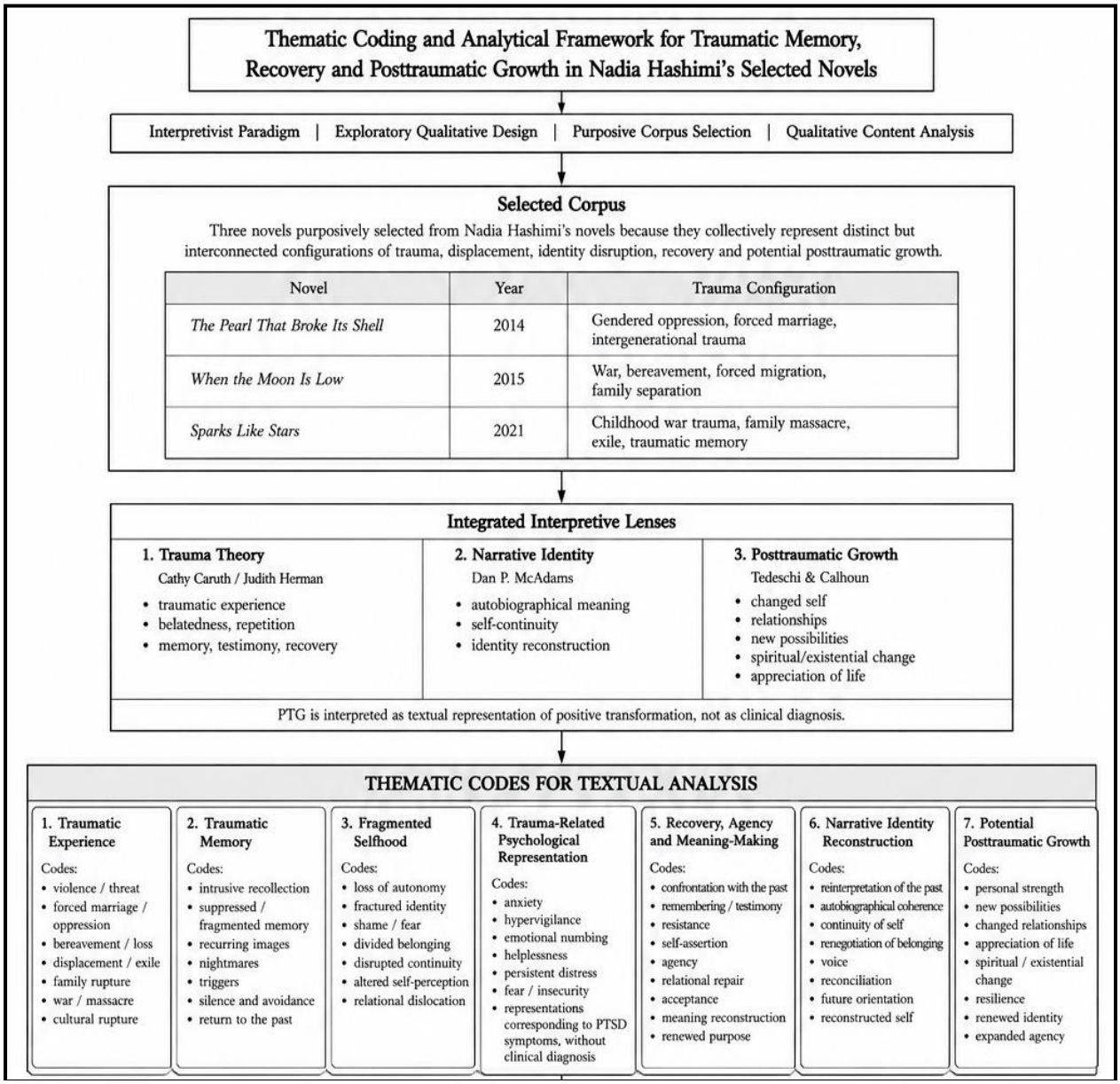


Figure 1. Framework of literary analysis

4. Analysis and Discussion

Table 3. Traumatic Memory, Fragmentation, and Identity

Analytical dimension	*The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*	*When the Moon Is Low*	*Sparks Like Stars*
Central traumatic condition	Gendered oppression, forced marriage, social exclusion and inherited trauma	War, bereavement, forced migration and family separation	Childhood political violence, family massacre, exile and suppressed memory

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Form of fragmentation	Rahima's socially imposed female identity is restricted; the bacha posh identity creates a conflict between social freedom and gendered expectations	Loss of home, family stability and social belonging fragments the protagonist's sense of security and identity	Sitara's childhood self is divided from her adult identity as Aryana; suppressed memories separate past and present
Major textual evidence	Rahima's transformation into a bacha posh temporarily changes her mobility and social possibilities, exposing the relationship between gender and identity	The family's flight from Afghanistan and subsequent displacement repeatedly destabilize home, family roles and belonging	Sitara's survival of political violence, relocation to America and changed identity demonstrate the persistence of an unresolved past
Contextual dimension	Patriarchy and the social practice of bacha posh	Afghan conflict, migration and refugee displacement	Political violence, exile and Afghan-American cultural hybridity

The three novels therefore construct fragmentation through different sources of rupture. In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, fragmentation is primarily gendered: identity is constrained by a social order that determines what women can do and how they can be recognized. Rahima's experience as bacha posh is particularly significant because it demonstrates that identity is not represented as entirely private or psychological; it is produced through social permission, mobility and recognition. Wahedi (2022) similarly connects the novel's representation of women's identity with the practice of bacha posh.

In *When the Moon Is Low*, fragmentation is generated less through gender transformation than through displacement and loss. The destruction of security, separation from familiar surroundings and responsibility for children reshape the protagonist's identity. Ahuja (2025) specifically interprets the novel through displacement, intergenerational trauma and maternal identity, showing how psychological and familial disruption becomes interconnected. *Sparks Like Stars* presents the most explicit relationship between traumatic memory and fragmented identity. Sitara's childhood experience of political violence remains psychologically connected to her adult life in America, while the name Aryana marks the distance between her present identity and her buried past. Torky (2022) identifies this buried childhood trauma and its persistence within adult identity, while Yasmin and Ahmad (2023) relate the protagonist's identity struggle to cultural hybridity.

Table 4. Recovery, Remembering, and Meaning-Making

Recovery process	*The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*	*When the Moon Is Low*	*Sparks Like Stars*
Primary mechanism	Resistance and self-assertion	Adaptation and maternal resilience	Confrontation with suppressed memory
Movement in identity	From imposed/subordinate identity toward greater self-	From displaced insecurity toward	From divided identity toward greater

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	recognition	reconstructed familial belonging	integration of Afghan and American selves
Relational dimension	Women's shared experiences connect individual suffering with intergenerational female experience	Motherhood and family relationships become central to survival and reconstruction	Family memory and the return to Afghanistan reconnect the protagonist with her historical past
Meaning-making	Agency becomes a means of redefining selfhood	Survival acquires meaning through family continuity and adaptation	Remembering and confronting the past become means of understanding the present

The recovery patterns demonstrate that Hashimi does not present healing as the disappearance of trauma. In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, recovery is expressed principally through voice, resistance and agency. The movement from imposed identity toward self-assertion provides the basis for reconstructed identity. In *When the Moon Is Low*, reconstruction is more strongly relational: survival is connected with motherhood, family continuity and the creation of belonging after displacement. This corresponds with Ahuja's (2025) emphasis on the relationship between displacement and maternal identity. *Sparks Like Stars* differs because recovery requires a more direct engagement with memory itself. Sitara's return to Kabul creates a narrative movement back toward the origin of her trauma. The recovery process consequently involves remembering, confronting and reinterpreting the past rather than simply adapting to the present. Torky (2022) identifies confrontation with buried childhood trauma as central to the novel's movement toward healing. This distinction is theoretically important because narrative identity depends partly upon how difficult experiences are incorporated into a continuing life story. Turner et al. (2024) and Gehrt et al. (2024), as discussed in the article, provide the conceptual basis for reading these changes as processes of narrative reconstruction rather than as simple psychological restoration.

Table 5. Posttraumatic Growth and Reconstructed Identity

Dimension of reconstruction	*The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*	*When the Moon Is Low*	*Sparks Like Stars*
Emerging strength	Personal agency	Relational resilience	Self-understanding
Transformation	Resistance to imposed gender roles	Rebuilding life despite displacement	Integration of traumatic past with adult identity
Meaning of belonging	Greater control over one's social identity	Re-establishment of familial and social belonging	Negotiation of Afghan and American identities
Potential PTG	Empowerment and agency	Renewed purpose, relational strength and belonging	Reconciliation, meaning-making and reconstructed identity

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Across the three novels, potential posttraumatic growth therefore assumes different forms rather than a single developmental pattern. Rahima's transformation is primarily associated with agency; the protagonist of *When the Moon Is Low* develops resilience through familial responsibility and adaptation; and Sitara's transformation depends more directly on recovering and interpreting a suppressed history. These differences correspond with contemporary PTG research cited in the article, which emphasizes that growth among displaced or trauma-affected populations varies according to personal, relational and cultural circumstances (Sultani et al., 2024; Pop et al., 2025). Importantly, these developments should be interpreted as potential textual manifestations of PTG, rather than proof that trauma has been completely overcome. The article explicitly cautions against treating recovery as a fixed sequence or assuming that positive transformation eliminates continuing distress. Jernslett et al. (2025) similarly indicate that trauma-related distress and posttraumatic growth can coexist, while Gendre et al. (2025) caution against automatically interpreting every positive change as genuine psychological growth.

Table 7. Comparative Synthesis

	The Pearl That Broke Its Shell	*When the Moon Is Low*	*Sparks Like Stars*
Dominant trauma	Gendered/social	War/displacement	Childhood political violence
Dominant rupture	Gender identity and autonomy	Home, family and belonging	Memory and continuity of self
Recovery emphasis	Resistance and agency	Adaptation and relationships	Memory confrontation and meaning-making
Reconstructed identity	Empowered female self	Relationally reconstructed belonging	Integrated diasporic identity

The three novels establish a comparative continuum of identity reconstruction without suggesting a uniform trajectory. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* locates trauma within patriarchal structures and represents reconstruction through resistance and agency. *When the Moon Is Low* expands trauma into the domains of war, migration, motherhood and belonging, making relational reconstruction central to recovery. *Sparks Like Stars* moves most explicitly into the relationship between traumatic memory and adult identity, presenting remembrance and confrontation with the past as necessary elements of reconstruction. The comparison therefore demonstrates that Hashimi's representation of recovery changes according to the configuration of trauma: gendered trauma generates struggles over agency, displacement generates struggles over belonging, and childhood political trauma generates struggles over memory and identity continuity. This corresponds closely with the article's central proposition that fragmented selfhood and reconstructed identity should be treated as interconnected but non-sequential dimensions of literary representation. The strongest comparative finding is consequently that reconstructed identity does not mean returning to the pre-traumatic self. Rather, each protagonist develops a modified understanding of self through agency, relationships, memory, cultural negotiation or meaning-making. This interpretation is consistent with the article's

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distinction between fragmented selfhood—disrupted continuity, suppressed memory, conflicting identities and fractured belonging—and reconstructed identity, which involves emerging self-understanding, agency, relational connection and future orientation.

5. Conclusion

The present study has examined the representation of traumatic memory, fragmented selfhood, recovery, and posttraumatic growth in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, *When the Moon Is Low*, and *Sparks Like Stars*. The analysis demonstrates that trauma in these narratives is not represented as an isolated psychological experience but as a condition shaped by gendered oppression, war, displacement, family separation, cultural memory, and historical violence. Across the three novels, traumatic experience disrupts continuity of self by restricting autonomy, separating individuals from familiar relationships and places, and leaving unresolved memories that continue to shape subsequent understandings of identity. The study therefore confirms that Hashimi constructs fragmented identity through both personal suffering and the wider social and historical structures within which that suffering occurs.

The comparative analysis further reveals that recovery is represented through different but interconnected processes. In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, resistance, self-assertion, and the reclamation of voice contribute to the reconstruction of female identity. In *When the Moon Is Low*, adaptation to displacement, maternal resilience, family relationships, and the rebuilding of belonging become central to the reconstruction of self. In *Sparks Like Stars*, recovery is more explicitly connected with the retrieval and confrontation of suppressed childhood memories, the return to the traumatic past, and the subsequent reinterpretation of identity. These differences demonstrate that Hashimi does not offer a single model of recovery; rather, the form of reconstruction is shaped by the particular configuration of trauma experienced by each protagonist. The study also establishes that posttraumatic growth in these narratives is best understood through observable changes in agency, relationships, meaning-making, self-understanding, and belonging rather than through the disappearance of trauma. The protagonists do not simply return to their pre-traumatic identities. Instead, their experiences generate altered and more complex understandings of self, in which the past remains significant while new possibilities for agency, connection, and future orientation emerge. This finding corresponds with contemporary research indicating that trauma-related distress and positive transformation may coexist and that posttraumatic growth should not be understood as an inevitable or linear consequence of adversity (Adler & Schwaba, 2024; Gendre et al., 2025; Jernslett et al., 2025).

Overall, the study argues that Hashimi's fiction represents identity reconstruction as an ongoing process of negotiating traumatic memory rather than restoring an earlier sense of self. The movement from fragmented selfhood toward reconstructed identity occurs through different combinations of remembering, confronting the past, developing agency, sustaining relationships, and creating meaning. The three novels consequently demonstrate how literary narratives can represent trauma not only through its capacity to fracture identity but also through the difficult and uneven processes by which individuals reinterpret their histories and construct new forms of self-understanding. The study thus extends existing readings of Hashimi's fiction by bringing traumatic memory, identity fragmentation, recovery, and

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posttraumatic growth into a single comparative framework, while retaining the complexity and continuing presence of trauma within processes of reconstruction.

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