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Trauma Recovery in Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*



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Abstract

Trauma is often a byproduct of war, exile, and displacement. Sometimes, it becomes a source for individuals to gain resilience and rebuild their identity. *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (2015) by Guzel Yakhina narrates the journey of a female protagonist, Zuleikha, who faces abuse, exile, and loss, resulting in deep-rooted trauma. This study examines her journey of recovery and healing using Herman's (1992) trauma theory. In her work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Herman describes the aftermath of traumatic events on a person's psyche and the process of healing. Herman (1992) expands the concept of recovery into three stages: safety, mourning, and reconnecting with life. This work utilises these ideas to study the reconstruction of Zuleikha's identity after exile and loss. The analysis shows how domestic violence infuses trauma in her. Displacement to a new land initiates the process of recovery. She forms relationships to gain security, reflects and narrates her past life for the second stage. For the final stage, she makes new bonds, co-exists and works for a community, finds a hobby and a job, and lets her son go for a better future. These aspects highlight her emotional and mental growth and identity reconstruction, leading to recovery from trauma.

Key words: Exile and displacement, trauma and recovery, agency, Herman's Trauma theory

Introduction

In recent years, researchers have used feminist trauma theories to study and analyse women's experiences of trauma. This includes social, political, and historical factors that affect their sense of self, identity, and agency (Khatri et al., 2025). *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (2015) is one such work that focuses on political violence, exile, and gender oppression to narrate the story of a woman. This novel explores her identity reconstruction. She finds agency and courage as the story progresses. She breaks free from the socio-cultural values she has been taught since childhood. She has to make these difficult choices to survive. She has to let go of her past and build a new identity over time. Mothering becomes a rich source of inner strength, personal identity and personal dignity.

The story presented in *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (2015) documents the story of Zuleikha, a Tatar Kulak in Stalinist Russia, and a meek wife to her husband and a blind mother-in-law. Her husband is murdered by the Russian soldier Ignatov. Zuleikha and other villagers are moved to an unidentified island. Along the way, she finds out she is pregnant and gives birth to a son, Yuzuf. They start a new life at the very beginning, which marks a new start for Zuleikha. She rediscovers her hidden potential and talents in the process of recovering from her trauma.

In the text, Zuleikha is traumatised long before the exile. She is physically, emotionally and verbally abused by her mother-in-law and husband. She has faced physical and emotional abuse ever since she got married. She is constantly punished in the form of physical violence. Yakhina (2015) highlight that her relationship with her husband lacks emotional and physical connection. Murtaza uses her solely to fulfil his physical desires. The very foundation of marriage, which should provide reliability and protection, is the cause of the dismantling of her safety and security. She is unable to

think and speak for herself as she is already exhausted by all of the house chores and domestic violence. This silence and numbness under the domestic oppression is a characteristic that shows the absence of safety and security.

Displacement from her home initially increases her trauma. She gets suicidal thoughts as she leaves the house. Death is a constant thought in her mind, and there is no escape from these thoughts. Even when she discovers that she is pregnant, she keeps thinking about death. She has lost all her life, and now, separation from this child also scares her. She feels that it is better to die without seeing the unborn child. However, the experience of displacement leads to a different and refined self.

This study examines the effect of exile in reshaping Zuleikha's identity and her recovery from this trauma. The research employs three stages of recovery, i.e., safety, mourning, and reconnection as described by Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), to study the character development of Zuleikha. This foregrounds the recovery of a traumatised female and how she reconstructs herself out of it. This research aims to answer the following questions;

1. How does the trauma caused by abuse, exile, and oppression affect Zuleikha's identity in the text?
2. How does Zuleikha achieve all three stages of recovery as suggested by Herman?

Literature Review

Herman's (1992) theory highlights the role of social support in the recovery process. Qazi and Saeed (2024) studied this idea in trauma recovery of Afghan women in *The Pearl that Broke its Shell* (2014) by Hashimi. Rahima, an early age marriage victim finds a saviour in Sekiba. Sekiba narrates her experiences, and they bond over this trauma, reflecting the importance of support.

Donia and Haikal's (2022) examination of *God Help the Child* (2015), using Herman's concepts, highlights that the connection between the Bride and Booker serves as a source of healing. The Bride suffers childhood trauma. She leaves for California, gets a job and later on starts a business. She starts wearing white. This is her way of accepting herself. Moreover, Booker sympathises with her rather than judging or treating her as an outcast. She also tells him that she saw a child being abused, but her mother did not let her tell the truth. The study shows how Booker's empathy accelerates the Bride's healing.

Mohammed's (2022) study of McCarthy's work, *The Road* (2006), through Herman's ideas suggests that recovery is possible through different hobbies and art forms. The text explores a father's attempt at healing. The son is a source of hope and courage for him. He remembers his son as the protagonist in storytelling that becomes a source to recover in the text. In *The City of Ember* (2003), protagonists Lina and Doona try to escape a destroyed city. Drawing emerges as a source of hope for them. Lina can imagine a world and life beyond this city that gives her a sense of safety. This freedom of imagination helps them to heal. Similarly, Ghasemi et al.'s (2022) study of *Saffron Dreams* (2009) highlights trauma recovery of Arissa by Scriptotherapy. She faced the death of her husband on 9/11, harassment, Islamophobia, and raises a mentally and physically disabled child. She employs her talent in writing and art to cope with the trauma and leads a successful life.

Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes (2015) is written against the backdrop of Russian and Tatar culture. There are random Tatar phrases, utterances, and elements. Pogorelaya (2016)

claims that Yakhina has intertwined modern elements with memories in the novel. Moreover, the writer captured the camp prose and women's prose well. Contrary to the Russian and Tatar critics, the novel is well-appreciated in world literature. Borisova (2017) states that the text highlights the hardships of leaving home and losing identity faced by the dekulakised people.

Subotic (2025) highlights the novel's utopian motifs. Travelling as a utopian feature encompasses not just the physical journey but also the characters' internal journey. Zuleikha's journey is presented as a symbolic journey where she does not know the final destination. The community of settlers is also an example of a Utopian society. All of them, with their expertise, actively participate in community work. The novel also highlights an explicitly feminist utopia. This utopia is a freedom from the patriarchal structures of society.

Romanovna (2022) studies the comparison and intertextual relationship between the Simurgh story and *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (2015). First of all, the story of the *Simurgh* is a metaphor for these exiles. *Simurgh* means thirty and is a story of birds that fly from many valleys. *Simurgh* also represents the thirty people who survived and reached the island in the novel. Also, the names of the mother and son are derived from the Quranic story of Zuleikha and Yusuf. However, the writer makes this a purer love, of a mother.

Kravtsova (2022) criticises Yakhina's portrayal of Russia's colonial rule. The researcher mentions that in an interview, the writer describes Soviet ideology as universal. Such stances ignore the states' colonial acts. The text glorifies the Tatar exile as a source of freedom. It does not indulge in the complexities of generational trauma that happens after any displacement. Moreover, the domestic abuse and oppressive gender roles are shown to be Islamic extremism. In reality, these practices are a product of cultures.

Anisimova (2020) also claims that the novel glorifies Soviet history. It shows that the exiles transform for the better while being in the camps. In reality, such histories does not turn out this way. Dolgov (2017) studies pagan elements in Zuleikha's belief system. In Slavic culture, it is believed that various demons and spirits live in a house like *Bichura*, *Basu Kapke Iyase*, *Zirat Iyase*. These pagan beliefs may seem regressive, but they are the real identity. It is important to highlight these details to avoid Islamophobia, as these practices are not a part of Islam.

Ben Abderrezak and Ben Amor (2023) examine how the text reimagines feminism in the face of trauma. Zuleikha breaks traditions and reinvents herself. She is arrested and sent into exile and lives through hunger, drowning and sickness, giving birth to a child, which defies the traditional femaleness and naivety attitudes. Bainazar (2022) discusses Zuleikha's transformation into a confident woman. That is why the protagonist must open her eyes to see and change herself. The phrase is repeated to address the need for change in Zuleikha's life.

The novel remains under study with respect to trauma recovery and healing. Previous research does not study the recovery using Herman's three stages of recovery, as stated in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992). This research caters for this research gap by studying the healing of Zuleikha in three stages.

Theoretical Framework

Herman (1992) devises three common stages of recovery and healing. She mentions that these stages are "convenient fiction" and a way to simplify a complex concept. These stages include biological to social treatment (p. 160). However, the results and

their time cannot be determined the same for everyone. The three stages of recovery are a) establishment of safety, b) remembrance and mourning, and c) reconnection with ordinary life.

a) Establishment of Safety

Having a sense of safety and security is the first step in the recovery process. Herman (1992) mentions that survivors start with control over themselves and then move towards control over their surroundings. Family, friends, and other close relationships can offer practical help to the survivor. Herman (1992) states, “creating a safe environment required the patient to make major changes in her life. This patient discovered, as many others have done, that she could not recover until she took charge of the material circumstances of her life” (p.177). This highlights the separation from the major source of trauma and the people who cause it. It comes as a horrifying experience in itself, as it requires one to come out of the habitual zone.

b) Remembrance and Mourning

After the survivor has regained a sense of connection and control, they can process their trauma. This is done by recalling the dreadful events. In this process, the survivor may get insecure or agitated at times. The suicidal thoughts that they carry in the first stage turn into a calm state of mind in this stage. The constant grieving about the trauma makes them prone to it after a time. Time feels moving once again (1992).

c) Reconnection

This stage is rebuilding a new life, identity, or future. They are now ready to face any horror or danger and fight it. For women, this stage frees them from the traditional feminine roles of society. They overcome their fears, assumptions, and inner struggles. In this new identity formation, they seek friendships and relationships. They are also willing to dedicate their newly reformed spirit to a partner. They get involved in social actions when they can explore more of their skills and qualities. They are energetic and strive to benefit their society. There is no hopelessness and surrender to evil, but a hope for a better future. It is admitting the imperfect world with a courageous heart (1992).

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis draws on Herman’s trauma theory as its perspective. The novel highlights the consequences of trauma on human beings and the efforts they make to heal themselves.

a) Reestablishment of Safety

The first stage of trauma recovery involves reestablishing a sense of safety. As mentioned earlier, Herman (1992) describes the first stage of recovery as regaining a sense of safety. This integral process involves gaining control over one’s body and environment. The individual should be moved away from the sites of trauma in her life to start the process. Zuleikha is separated from her lifelong source of trauma i.e., her house, and this marks the start of her journey of recovery. Subotic (2025) mentions this travelling as a utopian element. This is not only a physical journey but the internal self’s journey towards a new realm.

Firstly, she feels disoriented as she is away from home and among a crowd of strangers. However, this new place, where cultural, racial, and religious boundaries are distorted, symbolises an escape from the traumatic domestic space and marks a shift to a metaphorical safe space. In one of their encounters, soldiers use her full name, which

she has never heard before. “In Zuleikha’s whole life, she has never uttered ‘I’ as many times as she has during this month in prison. Modesty is a virtue, so it does not befit a decent woman to say ‘I’ a lot without reason” (p. 146). These lines signal a developing sense of agency compared to her former life. This use of “I” symbolises a gradual shift to self-recognition. However, it is rooted in the necessity of living rather than in rebellion.

Herman (1992) states, “The task of developing an adequate safety plan always includes a component of social support” (p.166). Throughout her journey, Zuleikha and the other caravan members develop a sense of community. They bond over their shared experiences and challenges, finding strength in one another. During this time, she starts communicating with Leibe, another caravan member. “Zuleikha and Volf Karlovich Leibe will become conversation partners, if peculiar ones” (p. 129). This friendship also does not follow the traditional patterns of companionship. It is based on understanding and acceptance of one another, thereby making it stronger. He discusses medical cases and terms that Zuleikha does not understand, but she enjoys their conversations. It shows seemingly implausible interpersonal relationship can make people improve. This relationship helps her to regain a feeling of security in a world where she had experienced abusive relationships before.

Zuleikha and Ignatov’s relationship is another important one, which creates a space for the conscious negotiation of traditional power formations. Throughout her conversations with Ignatov, she exhibits a self-confidence that is quite at odds with her previous experiences. The relationship is not subjected to patriarchy but an autonomous feeling of agency that is not subjected to outside forces. This connection offers her a shelter she has never had before. It is a personal and symbolic awakening marking development of new relations that feel secure.

b) Remembering and mourning the past

The second phase of Zuleikha’s recovery is the stage of remembrance and mourning. One should realise that it is not about repeating the past in painful detail. Herman (1992) states, “The ultimate goal, however, is to put the story, including its imagery, into words. The patient’s first attempts to develop a narrative language may be partially dissociated” (p. 183). It is all about nominating the suffering, lamenting the loss, and embarking on how to amalgamate the experiences into actual life.

The grieving and recollection of Zuleikha is indirect in the text. The mourning process occurs through internal dialogues, flashbacks, unsettling dreams, and hallucinations. During the early stages of her exile, Zuleikha struggles to cope with her grief properly but she is not completely numb as she experiences the pain of losing the child she is carrying. Moving forward in the process, Herman (1992) states that to develop a full understanding of the trauma story, the survivor must examine the moral questions of guilt and responsibility. Zuleikha feels this guilt that all the people around her are dead, and hence she thinks she should die as well. The realisation made her even guiltier to be alive in a world that has deprived her of so much. Additionally, she feels shameful because of circumstances like sitting with men in a mosque or people seeing her in pregnancy state.

Herman (1992) mentions that as survivors begin to seek answers to the questions in their minds. Grief causes one to doubt their positioning and past relationships. It is an aspect of growth in which the survivors are challenging what has become of them. Zuleikha experiences a continual conflict with her memories and the

people associated with them. “Everything her mother once told her- what was considered correct and necessary in her half-forgotten life in her husband’s house, is being taken apart and destroyed. Rules are being broken” (p. 323). This shows that she is breaking from the sociocultural norms she was taught. The new realities of her life force her to question these traditions. This destruction of old norms is the basis of her transformation, allowing her to form her own understanding of right and wrong.

Herman (1992) considers storytelling an effective means of healing. She states “It appears, then, that the “action of telling a story” in the safety of a protected relationship can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory” (p. 190). For Zuleikha, this secure space is created through her relationship with her son, Yuzuf. She tells him various stories, which can be taken as examples of storytelling. Yuzuf recalls that his mother told him there were as many as a hundred houses. Through these stories, she is preserving her cultural memory. Furthermore, she is actively reordering her fragmented past. She carefully chooses which memories to share and which ones to let go.

This process of selection parallels Herman’s (1992) idea that survivors of a long-term trauma have many memories that coexist but may be blurry. So, they choose the memory to tell, and it can be said on behalf of many other memories. This can help in understanding the pattern of Zuleikha’s storytelling. As follows, she tells her son the folktales she heard as a child. For instance, she tells him the story of a bird called *Semrug*, as the Tatars tell it. These birds travel from different valleys and face many challenges. In each valley, many birds die when they fail the challenge. At the end, only thirty of them survive, and they live together. Makhamovna (2025) states that this represents the thirty people who survived and reached the island. A large number of them travelled through multiple places, faced hardships, and only thirty survived. The settlement’s name is also *Semrug*. In short, her reflections and the stories align with Herman’s (1992) principle that mourning is an active reconstruction of identity.

c) Reconnection

Herman (1992) explains that the third stage of recovery means that “they must build a new life within a radically different culture from the one they have left behind” (p. 203). This stage is a reconstruction of the self that incorporates trauma experiences into a new identity. In this process, the focus shifts from the past to the possibilities of the present and future. Zuleikha manages to change identities and achieve this stage in the text. A change in her self-concept signals her journey. She is transformed into an antihero who speaks up later, rather than the quiet girl at the start of the story.

Beyond the emotional development, Zuleikha’s changing emotions about her new life are shown. For example, “living without the constant attention and stern supervision of an all-seeing eye was initially terrifying, as if she had been orphaned” (p. 322). This demonstrates that she had internalised the dominating behaviours of her past. She was lost and unsure without them. This is how trauma survivors feel in the process of rebuilding themselves. Over time, she grows accustomed to this new freedom. This realisation helps her develop a new, organised, regulated identity. The body of Zuleikha, previously under the will of Murtaza and the Vampire Hag, begins to acquire agency.

Herman (1992) describes that in this situation, the survivor builds some level of “control over her own bodily and emotional responses that reaffirms a sense of power” (p. 206). The survivor learns to manage her emotions of fear. This helps her to regain

her inner strength and confidence. One day, she encounters a bear in the forest while with Yuzuf. The bear approaches her son, which forces her to take the rifle and shoot. “Zuleikha pulls the hammer toward herself, and there is a loud click” (p.342). Yakhina describes the moments when she learns to shoot and finds a hidden power in herself. By chance, Ignatov is there as well, so he guides her. This learning is symbolic, as she becomes mentally and physically courageous because she now has a skill. She can defend herself from physical harm. Ben Abderrezak and Ben Amor (2023) mention that Zuleikha’s struggle to survive is focused, which subverts the traditional assumptions of women being weak and not prone to intense physical duty.

Hunting, shooting, and other outdoor work are often associated with men of society. However, females are obliged to do the house chores, as Herman (1992) states that “for women, it is also a repudiation of the social demand for the submissive” (p. 205). In the third stage, women survivors challenge the norms by taking bold, independent actions. When the exiles settle on this island and build a settlement from scratch, Zuleikha takes her position in the kitchen. She helps with cooking and cutting stuff. Later on, hunting becomes her favourite job. Additionally, she learns nursing while living with Dr Leibe. “She has also learned to apply dressings, treat wounds, and poke a long, sharp syringe [...]” (p.374). These lines show her movement from domestic chores imposed on her as a woman. By learning these skills, she steps into the field of authority, knowledge, and public service rather than household labour. She proves her capabilities in spaces traditionally reserved for trained men. Bainazar (2022) claims that Zuleikha has to leave behind her kitchen work and take charge of her life. The shift in her nature of work gives her confidence as she does her work willingly and without any pressure.

As the survivor is willing to work, she is also willing to take part in community work. Herman (1992) describes this by stating, “Social action offers the survivor a source of power” (p. 215). This means when a survivor takes part in actions that help others or improve society, she feels more capable. The efforts and skills exist independently, but working with others helps these abilities flourish. Zuleikha does not hunt for herself, but serves a purpose in society. A hunting union was formed of five members, and she was a part of it. She collaborates with the community members. Such work helps regain characteristics such as patience, resilience, courage, and confidence. She has also earned money from this labour for seven years. This financial independence acts as a booster for the characteristics mentioned.

This confidence is also gained by resolving inner and outer conflicts and by strengthening connections with others. Herman (1992) states that third-stage survivors challenge external pressures and their inner troubles. They face others as they are “[...] ready to reveal their secrets, to challenge the indifference [...]” (p. 207). In this context, Zuleikha also forms authentic connections grounded in shared struggle and mutual respect. Her companionship with Leibe is an example of reconnection with others and resolving conflicts and pressures. She is worried about living with Leibe. She lives in the infirmary because her son starts fainting, and this way, he remains under the doctor’s care. He tells her that she does not owe him anything. This explains that he is there as a doctor, so she does not have to obey him as a husband.

Herman (1992) writes, “At this point, the survivor may be ready to devote her energy more fully to a relationship with a partner” (p. 213). Zuleikha accepts her feelings for Ignatov and starts meeting him in the camp. These feelings are not forced on her as she rejects him multiple times. The tent where she meets him symbolises a

space where she is reconnecting with herself and with someone else. The affiliations in this tent are not regulated by power and abuse. Yakhina (2015) presents her emotions by writing, “there is no place for recollections and fears in the black tent- its bulky animal hides reliably protect Zuleikha from the past and future” (p. 421). Her bond with Ignatov is based on interdependence. It showcases a gradual rebuilding of trust that the survivors struggle with. Herman (1992) states that the survivor is more autonomous at this point and she “can maintain her own point of view and boundaries while respecting others” (p. 222). She stops visiting him and does not want to live with him in his tent, as it could also affect the child’s emotional state. He does not impose his love and power upon her, and this gives her confidence to trust and love.

Zuleikha’s relationship with her son is another expression of this reunion with others. Herman (1992) insists that this is a stage in which the parent survivor is overprotective and attached to their children. She does not want them to have to endure a similar trauma by shielding them against all the issues. She is aware of the side effects of her trauma and actions on the existence of the child. This is seen through the love of his son that Zuleikha had. Her emotional attachment to Yuzuf is intense. “It scares Zuleikha that separation from Yuzuf is imminent [...]” (p. 463). This depicts how she fears the possibility of losing him. All her emotional and physical energy is focused on Yuzuf, and a web of deep dependency is formed. Mohammed (2022) explores the relational aspects of trauma through Herman’s theory in *The Road* (2006) where parental love for children serves as a source of healing. This highlights the idea that recovery is relational and cannot happen in isolation.

Zuleikha manages to get over this last obstacle. Herman (1992) presents this progress as she says that “She has a clear sense of what is important and what is not. Having encountered evil, she knows how to cling to what is good. Having encountered the fear of death, she knows how to celebrate life” (p. 220). Reflecting on this statement, it is evident that Zuleikha has also developed a clear sense of things in life. By the end of the text, ships transport people to the city, and Yuzuf dreams of taking this journey as well. She is overwhelmed with emotions at first as “the tears flow so generously and swiftly that it seems they are not coming from her eyes but from somewhere at the bottom of her heart” (p. 471). Initially, the thought of letting go of Yuzuf is suffocating for her. Herman (1992) states that reconnecting with life involves taking risks and losing something, as the capacity to let go indicates psychological healing. This decision to send her son far away reflects an important step in her healing. She asks Ignatov to register Yuzuf as his son so that he can leave. She realises that there is no future for him in this land. The last blow of letting Yuzuf go marks the final act of Zuleikha’s healing journey. This highlights Herman’s ideas that recovery involves a reconstruction of the self and the world around.

Findings

The textual analysis of the present research highlights following findings:

- I.** First, Zuleikha experiences trauma due to domestic abuse and oppression because of her husband and mother in law. Exile, for once, struck her but later on, when she moves to a new place, she starts recovering. She gains agency through little acts that transform her identity.
- II.** Second, Zuleikha’s rediscovery of identity can be explained in terms of the three phases of recovery described in Herman’s trauma theory.
 - a.** During the initial phase, she is separated from her traumatic home life. She gains a sense of security as she lives with a community and makes

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healthy connections.

- b. In the remembrance and mourning stage, she narrates stories to her. Also, she reflects and rethinks her past when she goes hunting, which helps in this stage.
- c. The third recovery stage is an emotional rebirth. During her stay in the settlement, she fosters a friendship with Leibe and a romantic relationship with Ignatov. She finds hunting to be her favourite hobby that helps her in her mental growth. She works for the community and gains a sense of purpose. In the end, sending her son to the city makes her emotionally independent, and despair becomes a thing of the past that does not overshadow her life anymore.

Conclusion

The results of this work emphasise the notion that Yakhina (2015) does not passively depict suffering, but she shows a trajectory of identity redefinition following trauma, alienation, and victimisation. Though the recovery theory presented by Herman does incorporate some specific phases, the story makes this theory complex as it explains the unique effect of trauma in women and how this effect changes their identity in particular settings. Such a gendered approach places this discourse in the feminist trauma studies, which anticipate the unheard voices of women. As a result, the concept of trauma is not only perceived as a person's psychological state but as a product of gender expectations, social and cultural dynamics, politics and history. Therefore, *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (2015) is not merely a story of depression in the Stalinist exile camp; it is an ode to a strong woman who can turn pain into power.

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