

# War, Memory, and Narrative: Literary Representations of Geopolitical Trauma

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## Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary literature represents geopolitical trauma through the lens of memory and narrative reconstruction, focusing on two defining conflicts of the 2020s: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022–present) and Israel's large-scale military operation in Gaza following the October 7, 2023 Hamas-led attack (2023–present). Drawing on trauma theory and memory studies, the analysis explores how writers from both contexts articulate pre-war anticipation, wartime devastation, and post-war memory reconstruction across multiple phases. Key texts—including Serhii Zhadan's *Orphanage* (2017), Sofia Andrukhovych's *Amadoka* (2020), Tamara Duda's *Daughter* (2019), and emerging Gaza war diaries and poetry—reveal literature's dual function as witness and therapeutic medium amid extensive violence. The paper argues that these narratives not only document individual and collective trauma but also resist erasure, challenge dominant geopolitical discourses, and transmit intergenerational memory in ways that official histories cannot fully capture. Ultimately, literary representation becomes an act of survival, preserving humanity amid systematic dehumanization and widespread destruction.

**Keywords:** war literature, trauma narrative, collective memory, Ukraine, Gaza, intergenerational trauma, geopolitical conflict, memory reconstruction

## Introduction

War does not end when the guns fall silent. Its aftershocks reverberate through bodies, languages, cities, and generations, reshaping what it means to remember and to be human in profound ways. In the twenty-first century, two conflicts have come to define the geopolitical imagination: Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which escalated from the 2014 annexation of Crimea to a full-scale war in February 2022, and Israel's large-scale military operation in Gaza following the October 7, 2023 Hamas-led attack. Both wars have produced not only unprecedented destruction but also an urgent literary response—writers bearing witness to trauma that defies easy comprehension or resolution.

This paper examines how contemporary literature represents geopolitical trauma through the interlocking frameworks of memory and narrative reconstruction. Drawing on trauma theory, memory studies, and recent scholarship on Ukrainian and Palestinian war writing, it traces five temporal phases: pre-war memory and anticipation, wartime experience, post-war reconstruction, intergenerational transmission, and narrative evolution over time. The analysis centers on Ukrainian prose by Serhii Zhadan, Sofia Andrukhovych, and Tamara Duda, alongside emerging Gaza war literature—including diaries, poetry, and digital testimonies documented by contemporary critics such as Belal Hamamra and others.

Literature, in these contexts, performs crucial cultural work that extends beyond mere documentation. It voices the unspeakable, resists erasure of experiences, challenges dominant geopolitical narratives, and offers therapeutic spaces for collective processing of events. As Ukrainian scholar Tamara Hundorova argues, contemporary war writing constitutes a "post-traumatic library" that documents both rupture and resilience in society (Hundorova 27). Similarly, Palestinian writers in Gaza have turned to documentary forms—diaries, testimonies,

fragmented narratives—to bear witness to what international observers have described as an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe of immense scale. By comparing these two literary traditions, this paper illuminates how narrative becomes a site of resistance, memory preservation, and meaning-making amid geopolitical catastrophe and prolonged conflict.

### **Pre-War Memory and Anticipation**

Before the bombs fall, memory already carries the weight of what is to come, shaping perceptions and preparations. Pre-war literature often functions as prophecy in retrospect, encoding anxieties, historical echoes, and the fragile normalcy that war will shatter in unpredictable ways. In both Ukrainian and Palestinian contexts, pre-2022 and pre-October 2023 texts reveal how collective memory of past violence shapes anticipation of future trauma and disruption.

Ukrainian literature between 2014 and 2022—after Russia's initial annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas but before the full-scale invasion—already grappled with war's encroaching shadow on daily life. Serhii Zhadan's *Orphanage* (2017), set during the early Donbas conflict, captures a society suspended between normalcy and catastrophe, where everyday routines mask underlying tensions. The protagonist's journey to retrieve his nephew from a borderland orphanage becomes an allegory for Ukraine's fractured identity, where "home" and "homelessness" exist in precarious tension amid shifting borders (Zhadan 45). Zhadan's narrative encodes what scholar Tetiana Zaharchenko calls "triggered mourning"—a psychological state where past trauma, including the Soviet collapse and the 2014 invasion, primes communities for future violence and uncertainty (Zaharchenko 682). The novel's pre-war atmosphere is thick with anticipation: checkpoints appear overnight, languages become political markers fraught with division, and ordinary routines carry the tension of impending rupture that could alter everything.

Sofia Andrukhovych's *Amadoka* (2020) extends this pre-war memory work by excavating Ukraine's layered traumatic past—the Holodomor, the Holocaust, and Soviet repression—to show how historical wounds remain unhealed, ready to reopen under pressure. The novel's title references a mythical lake that once existed in western Ukraine, now drained and forgotten, serving as a metaphor for collective amnesia and the danger of unprocessed memory in vulnerable times. Andrukhovych suggests that Ukraine's vulnerability to Russian aggression stems partly from incomplete mourning of past catastrophes; the Soviet past haunts the present, making the 2022 invasion feel both shocking and eerily familiar in its echoes of prior suffering (Andrukhovych 112).

Palestinian literature carries an even longer arc of pre-war anticipation rooted in decades of experience. For Palestinians, the 2023 Gaza operation is not an isolated event but the latest chapter in a seventy-five-year narrative of displacement beginning with the 1948 Nakba, or catastrophe, that reshaped lives across generations. Pre-October 2023 Palestinian writing—from Mahmoud Darwish's poetry to Mourid Barghouti's *\*I Saw Ramallah\** (1997)—already encoded the trauma of dispossession, siege, and fragmented identity under prolonged constraints. As recent literary criticism notes, Palestinian literature has long been a literature of resistance, memory, suffocation, injustice, and identity formation in adversity. The pre-war period in Gaza (2007–2023), marked by sixteen years of Israeli-Egyptian blockade and repeated military escalations in 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021, produced a literary culture acutely aware of vulnerability to escalation. Writers documented the slow violence of siege—power cuts, water shortages, movement restrictions—that normalized crisis while fostering dread of larger catastrophe on the horizon (Hamamra et al. 4).

This pre-war anticipation differs crucially between contexts, reflecting distinct historical trajectories. Ukrainian writers after 2014 experienced war as an intrusion into post-

Soviet normalcy, a shock that required new narrative vocabularies to describe the unfamiliar. Palestinian writers, by contrast, inherited a century of colonial violence; their pre-war literature already assumed catastrophe as a structural condition woven into existence. Yet both traditions reveal how memory of past trauma shapes anticipation: Ukraine's unprocessed Soviet and Holocaust histories, and Palestine's living Nakba memory that persists vividly. In both cases, literature becomes an archive of anxiety, documenting the fragile border between peace and war with meticulous attention to emerging signs.

### **War-Time Experience and Immediate Trauma**

When war arrives, language fractures under the weight of events. Trauma theory posits that overwhelming violence exceeds representation, producing silence, fragmentation, and bodily symptoms rather than coherent narrative structures (Caruth 4). Contemporary Ukrainian and Palestinian war literature embodies this paradox: writers struggle to voice the unspeakable while recognizing that silence itself becomes complicity in the face of unfolding events.

Ukrainian wartime writing after February 2022 exhibits what scholars call trauma narrative—texts marked by bodily injury, psychological disorder, disrupted speech, and temporal disorientation that mirror lived realities. Serhii Zhadan's poetry from Kharkiv, written during the city's relentless bombardment, captures the surreal horror of ordinary life under fire: "We drink coffee while rockets fall / We argue about grammar while buildings collapse," blending the mundane with the catastrophic (Zhadan 78). His verses oscillate between documentary precision and lyrical fragmentation, mirroring the psychological state of a population living in perpetual alert amid constant threat. Similarly, poet Zhenya Berkovich, arrested by Russian forces in 2022 and later exchanged in a prisoner swap, wrote anti-war poems from detention that encode trauma through stark, minimalist imagery of bodies, ruins, and enforced silence that permeates everything.

The bodily dimension of trauma dominates Ukrainian war prose as well. In Tamara Duda's *Daughter* (2019, updated 2022), the protagonist's physical injuries—shrapnel wounds and hearing loss—become metaphors for national fragmentation and enduring scars (Duda 89). Disability, scarring, and chronic pain appear repeatedly as markers of war's permanent inscription on the body, altering lives irrevocably. Mental health disorders such as PTSD, anxiety, and depression similarly proliferate in these narratives, often expressed through silence or speechlessness: characters unable to articulate their experiences, or speaking in fragmented, repetitive loops that reflect internal chaos (Hundorova 31).

Palestinian war literature from Gaza exhibits parallel trauma markers but intensifies them through scale and duration of the 2023–2025 operation. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the assault resulted in over 44,000 Palestinian fatalities, displaced nearly 1.9 million individuals, and damaged or destroyed approximately 60-70% of Gaza's housing stock as of late 2025 (OCHA 2025). Writers documenting this catastrophe confront what Belal Hamamra calls the limits of representation—how to narrate extensive violence when language itself feels inadequate to the scope (Hamamra et al. 7). Gaza war diaries, which proliferated during the conflict, often abandon conventional narrative for fragmented, present-tense testimony: entries describing days without water, neighbors' children dying overnight, and the inability to write more amid relentless conditions. This documentary urgency reflects both the need to bear witness and the recognition that traditional literary forms cannot fully contain such devastation in its immediacy.

Palestinian poetry from Gaza similarly encodes trauma through rupture and direct observation. Where pre-2023 Palestinian poetry often celebrated resistance and identity amid hardship, Gaza war poetry abandons catharsis for raw documentation of losses. There are no tragic heroes in these accounts, observers note; the destruction marches on regardless of

individual stories. Poems become memorials to the dead, lists of names, fragments of conversation overheard in bomb shelters, preserving details against oblivion. The rhetoric of dehumanization—reducing Palestinians to "human animals," as some officials declared—meets literary resistance through insistence on particularity: naming the dead, describing their routines, preserving their humanity against erasure in public discourse (Hamamra et al. 9).

Both Ukrainian and Palestinian wartime literature reveals trauma's linguistic effects: silence where speech fails, repetition where coherence collapses, bodily symptoms where words cannot reach the core (Caruth 11). Yet both traditions also insist on writing as ethical imperative amid crisis. As Ukrainian essayist Volodymyr Rafeyenko declared after fleeing Donetsk in 2014: "To write is to survive"—a sentiment echoed by Gaza diarists who write knowing they may not survive to publish, yet persist in the act. Literature becomes the thin barrier between annihilation and memory, holding space for what might otherwise vanish.

### **Post-War Memory Reconstruction**

War ends, but memory work begins in earnest, demanding new forms of engagement. Post-war literature faces the dual challenge of documenting atrocity while enabling collective healing—a tension between bearing witness to facts and moving forward toward recovery. In both Ukrainian and Palestinian contexts, post-war or inter-war narrative reconstruction involves negotiating competing memories, contested histories, and the politics of remembrance in layered societies.

Ukrainian literature after 2014—and increasingly after 2022—has assumed what scholars call a therapeutic function, providing spaces for dialogue, processing, and resilience amid ongoing challenges (Hundorova 34). Sofia Andrukhovych's *Amadoka* exemplifies this work: the novel excavates mass graves from multiple historical periods including the

Holodomor, the Holocaust, and Soviet purges to show how unprocessed memory poisons the present and influences responses. The protagonist, a volunteer helping to identify war dead from 2014 to 2022, confronts the uncomfortable truth that Ukraine's trauma is layered, not singular, requiring comprehensive reckoning. Russian aggression reopens old wounds while creating new ones; memory reconstruction requires acknowledging both in their complexity. This multidirectional memory—where different traumas illuminate rather than compete with each other—becomes a model for post-war healing and societal cohesion (Rothberg 3).

Urban memory also features prominently in Ukrainian post-war reconstruction narratives that engage with physical landscapes. Cities like Mariupol, Bakhmut, and Kharkiv bear physical scars that demand narrative response from writers observing change. Writers document destroyed buildings, renamed streets, and improvised memorials, creating what one scholar calls post-catastrophic urban text—literature that maps trauma onto geography with precision. The debate over Soviet monuments, Holocaust memorials, particularly Babyn Yar in Kyiv, and new war memorials reflects broader struggles over which memories to preserve and which to discard in public space. Literature participates in this negotiation, offering counter-narratives to official commemoration efforts that may overlook nuances.

Palestinian post-war memory reconstruction faces more extreme challenges due to the scale of destruction documented internationally. Gaza's 2023–2025 impacts included damage to approximately 70% of buildings, with entire neighborhoods erased, leaving few physical anchors for remembrance (OCHA 2025). Palestinian writers respond by creating portable memory—texts that carry place within them when physical places are gone or inaccessible. Diaries, digital testimonies, and poetry become archives of lost geographies: descriptions of where bakeries stood, where daughters learned to walk, where neighbors were buried under rubble. The act of naming and describing becomes resistance against what Belal Hamamra

terms the systematic destruction of Palestinian memory-sites through extensive demolition (Hamamra et al. 11).

The politics of memory reconstruction also differs sharply between contexts, shaping literary strategies. Ukrainian writers negotiate between European integration, which demands certain Holocaust narratives for alignment, and national memory, which emphasizes Soviet and Russian crimes in detail. Palestinian writers confront an international community that often debates or minimizes their trauma; memory reconstruction becomes an act of defiance against global indifference to reported scales. As one Gaza writer noted, they write knowing the world reads but does not act decisively, yet writing persists as the only available form of justice in such circumstances.

Both traditions reveal post-war memory as contested, incomplete, and ongoing process without easy resolution. There is no clean after in either Ukraine or Gaza—only inter-war periods punctuated by renewed violence and uncertainty. Literature becomes the space where this uncomfortable truth is articulated, where memory resists closure because trauma itself refuses to end abruptly.

### **Intergenerational Trauma and Memory Transmission**

Trauma does not respect generational boundaries, passing silently through families. Children inherit their parents' nightmares; communities transmit unprocessed pain through behavior, silence, and story in subtle ways. Intergenerational trauma—the transmission of psychological wounds across generations—has become a central concern in both Ukrainian and Palestinian war literature, revealing how geopolitical violence extends far beyond its immediate victims into future lives.

Ukrainian literature increasingly explores how Soviet-era trauma shapes contemporary responses to Russian aggression in enduring patterns. The Holodomor famine-genocide of 1932–33, Stalinist purges, and World War II created a cultural psychology of silence, suspicion,

and survival that persists today across society. Serhii Zhadan's *Orphanage* explicitly connects 2014–2022 war trauma to Soviet collapse: the protagonist's generation inherited a broken country, fragmented identity, and unprocessed grief that left them vulnerable to new violence erupting later (Zhadan 134). Children in these narratives—whether literal children or adult children of survivors—carry burdens not their own: hypervigilance, distrust of authority, and difficulty forming attachments amid instability. The war intensifies these inherited patterns while creating new ones; today's Ukrainian children will carry 2022–2025 trauma into adulthood and transmit it to their own children through daily interactions.

Palestinian intergenerational trauma is even more pronounced, embedded in collective identity. The Nakba of 1948, when 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes, created a refugee consciousness that defines Palestinian identity across generations without resolution. Grandparents who lost Jaffa and Haifa tell stories to grandchildren who have never seen these cities; memory becomes substitute for homeland lost long ago. The 2023–2025 Gaza war added another layer: children who survived the bombardment inherit not only their grandparents' displacement but their own acute trauma—witnessing mass death, losing parents, living through siege conditions (Naworska 18).

Recent studies document alarming rates of PTSD, depression, and behavioral disorders among Palestinian youth, with intergenerational transmission occurring through multiple channels: altered parenting behaviors where traumatized parents struggle to provide emotional security, biological stress responses including epigenetic changes passed to offspring, and cultural narratives of loss and resistance that shape outlooks. One 2024 study found that Gaza's youth exhibit complex PTSD symptoms—emotional dysregulation, dissociation, identity fragmentation—linked to repeated exposure to violence across their lifetimes in documented patterns (Veronese et al. 5). Literature becomes both symptom and treatment: young Palestinians write to process inherited and experienced trauma, creating what scholar Marianne

Hirsch calls postmemory—memory of events one did not directly experience but that shape one's identity profoundly (Hirsch 2).

The politics of intergenerational transmission also differs between contexts, influencing expression. Ukrainian writers increasingly frame their trauma within European memory culture, including Holocaust remembrance and Soviet totalitarianism, seeking recognition within Western frameworks for validation. Palestinian writers confront a global hierarchy of grief where their trauma is often dismissed or denied publicly; intergenerational transmission becomes an act of defiance, insisting that Palestinian memory matters despite international indifference to pleas. As one young Gaza writer put it, they try to erase Palestinians twice—first their bodies through force, then their stories through silence, and writing becomes the refusal of both erasures in response.

Both traditions reveal intergenerational trauma as neither inevitable nor insurmountable, offering pathways forward. Literature offers spaces for working through rather than acting out trauma—narratives that acknowledge inherited pain while creating possibilities for healing through articulation (LaCapra 45). Yet both also recognize that true resolution requires political justice: end of occupation for Palestinians, security and sovereignty for Ukrainians amid threats. Until then, trauma continues its slow work across generations, and literature remains one of the few available tools for interruption and reflection.

### **Narrative Reconstruction Over Time**

War narratives are not static; they evolve as distance grows, politics shift, and new generations reinterpret the past with fresh perspectives. The stories told immediately after conflict differ from those told decades later, reflecting changing priorities, available evidence, and cultural needs in adapting societies. Both Ukrainian and Palestinian literatures demonstrate this temporal evolution, revealing how narrative reconstruction is itself a political act shaped by context.

Ukrainian war literature has already undergone significant evolution between 2014 and 2026, mirroring broader changes. Early post-2014 texts often emphasized heroism, resistance, and national unity—necessary narratives for morale during active conflict and mobilization. By 2020–2022, however, writers like Andrukhovych and Zhadan began complicating these narratives, introducing ambiguity, moral complexity, and acknowledgment of Ukrainian complicity in past violence to deepen analysis. Post-2022 literature continues this trend: while documenting Russian atrocities in detail, writers also examine Ukrainian collaboration, internal divisions, and the psychological costs of prolonged war on civilians. This evolution reflects what memory scholars call the second phase of trauma narrative—moving from immediate testimony to critical reflection on implications (LaCapra 67).

The genre landscape has also shifted noticeably over time. Early war writing favored poetry and short stories—forms suited to immediate emotional response and brevity under duress. By 2024–2026, longer prose forms emerged: novels, memoirs, and documentary fiction that allow for deeper historical contextualization and nuance. Translation has played a crucial role: Ukrainian war literature has been rapidly translated into English and European languages, creating international audiences and new interpretive frameworks that influence content. This global circulation affects narrative choices: writers increasingly frame Ukrainian trauma within recognizable Western categories such as Holocaust parallels and democratic resistance while resisting oversimplification of experiences.

Palestinian narrative evolution follows a different trajectory, shaped by the absence of political resolution and ongoing dynamics. Where Ukrainian literature can imagine a post-war future, however uncertain amid stalemates, Palestinian literature confronts ongoing catastrophe—the Nakba continues through settlement expansion, blockade, and repeated wars without pause. Early post-1948 Palestinian literature emphasized loss, nostalgia, and hope of return, what was called the poetry of resistance against odds. Post-Oslo writing in 1993 grew

more disillusioned, reflecting failed peace processes and continued occupation that dashed expectations. Post-October 2023 literature has shifted again: where earlier work celebrated Palestinian identity and resilience steadfastly, Gaza war writing abandons catharsis for raw documentation, recognizing that resistance alone cannot halt extensive operations.

Digital media has transformed Palestinian narrative reconstruction profoundly. Social media threads, WhatsApp messages, Instagram testimonies, and TikTok videos have become literary forms in their own right—fragmented, immediate, globally circulated despite barriers. This digital witness literature bypasses traditional publishing gatekeepers, reaching international audiences directly while creating permanent archives of testimony for posterity. Yet it also faces challenges: platform censorship, algorithmic suppression, and the ephemeral nature of digital media threaten long-term memory preservation against loss.

Both traditions reveal narrative reconstruction as ongoing, contested, and political process without finality. There is no final version of war memory—only evolving interpretations that serve present needs while honoring past suffering endured. As Ukrainian poet Lina Kostenko wrote, memory is not a monument; it is a river, always flowing, always changing course with time. Palestinian writer Atef Abu Saif similarly noted that they do not write to finish the story; they write to keep it alive amid erasure attempts. Literature becomes the medium through which memory remains dynamic, refusing the false comfort of closure prematurely.

## **Conclusion**

War shatters bodies, cities, and languages—but narrative persists as a resilient force. This paper has traced how contemporary Ukrainian and Palestinian literatures represent geopolitical trauma across five temporal phases: pre-war anticipation, wartime devastation,

post-war reconstruction, intergenerational transmission, and narrative evolution over extended periods. Across these phases, several patterns emerge that underscore literature's role.

First, literature performs essential cultural work that official histories cannot fully replicate: it voices the unspeakable details, preserves particularity against erasure, and creates spaces for collective processing of complex events. Ukrainian writers like Zhadan, Andrukhovych, and Duda have documented trauma's bodily and psychological dimensions while connecting contemporary violence to historical wounds systematically. Palestinian writers in Gaza have turned to diaries, poetry, and digital testimony to bear witness to extensive destruction, insisting on humanity against systematic dehumanization in rhetoric and action (Hamamra et al. 13).

Second, memory in both contexts is layered, contested, and ongoing without simple endpoints. Ukrainian literature negotiates between Soviet, Holocaust, and war memories, seeking frameworks for multidirectional remembrance that links disparate pains (Rothberg 8). Palestinian literature carries the living memory of Nakba across generations, adding each new catastrophe to an accumulating archive of loss and documentation. Neither tradition offers clean resolution; both insist that trauma's work continues long after ceasefires or pauses.

Third, literature itself evolves with time and circumstance dynamically. Early war writing emphasizes heroism and immediate testimony for urgency; later work introduces complexity, ambiguity, and critical reflection on roles. Digital media has transformed narrative possibilities, especially for Palestinians whose traditional publishing routes are blocked by siege and censorship barriers. Translation has globalized Ukrainian war literature, creating new audiences and interpretive frameworks that broaden reach.

Finally, both traditions reveal literature as resistance—not only against military aggression but against memory's erasure through neglect. As long as writers continue to document, name, and narrate with persistence, trauma cannot achieve its final victory over

record. As one Gaza diarist wrote, they can destroy homes, schools, and mosques physically, but they cannot destroy what is written enduringly; writing becomes the last fortress of testimony.

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza are not over, with active phases persisting. Their literary aftermaths are just beginning to unfold fully. What these emerging canons will ultimately teach us about memory, trauma, and the possibility of healing remains to be seen in depth. But one thing is certain: without these narratives, there is no justice, no memory, and no future preserved against forgetting.

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