



## Post-Traumatic Stress and Its Impact on the Dramatic Character in the School Theatre Text

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### Abstract

This study aims to explore post-traumatic emotions and examine their impact on the dramatic character in the school theatre text through analyzing the manifestations of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as reflected in character behavior. These manifestations appear through the character's responses to traumatic events in terms of action and reaction. PTSD is viewed as a psychological condition resulting from painful and distressing experiences that are reactivated through memory, generating psychological pressure and accelerating dramatic events.

The study approaches PTSD through biological, psychological, and cognitive interpretations, focusing on the psychological, social, and physical dimensions of the dramatic character. Based on this framework, several analytical indicators were derived, emphasizing that the dramatic character becomes the focal point of trauma beginning from the moment of reaction.

A purposively selected sample was analyzed using a specially designed analytical instrument, represented by the school play *So That We Do Not Awaken the Dead* by the Iraqi playwright Abdullah Jad'an. The results indicate that the psychological dimension recorded the highest impact (44%), followed by the social dimension (36%), while the physical dimension showed the lowest impact (20%). The study concludes that existential anxiety and fear of loss reveal deeper inner human suffering than external events alone.

**Keywords:** Post-Traumatic Stress, Dramatic Character, School Theatre.

### 1. Methodological Framework

#### 1.1 Research Problem and Rationale

The dramatic character constitutes the central axis of theatrical performance, as it carries the direct message through which the intended purpose of the work is realized and received by the audience in a clear and immediate manner. Depending on the character's possession of expressive skills, emotional responses, and behavioral manifestations, it may become the focal point of a psychological shock, initiating the dramatic journey of the theatrical performance.

Psychological disturbance emerges as a reaction to a specific event that may be frightening or distressing, occurring as a temporal sequence activated through memory and beyond the control of rational awareness. Accordingly, it is essential for both the playwright and the theatre director to understand the post-traumatic conditions experienced by the dramatic character and their resulting effects, in order to construct an integrated theatrical work in which reactions and emotions accurately reflect the character's inner suffering. Based on the foregoing, the research problem is articulated through the following questions:

Q1: What are post-traumatic disorders?

Q2: What is their impact on the dramatic character in the school theatre text?

#### 1.2 Significance of the Study

The significance of the present study is manifested in the following aspects:

1. It benefits practitioners involved in school activities, including playwrights and directors of school theatre affiliated with the Iraqi Ministry of Education.



2. It contributes to planning a new strategic approach to theatrical performances that focus on post-traumatic emotions of the dramatic character, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and success of school theatre productions.
3. It emphasizes the importance of the dimensions of dramatic character, particularly the psychological dimension, which represents the character's response to events and ensures the coherent and harmonious progression of the theatrical performance.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

The present study aims to:

Explore post-traumatic emotions and identify their impact on the dramatic character in the school theatre text.

### 1.4 Research Limits

The present study is delimited as follows:

- Subject Matter: School theatre texts for the secondary education stage.
- Spatial Scope: Directorate of School Activities, Iraqi Ministry of Education.
- Temporal Scope: 2017–2023.

### 1.5 Definition of Terms

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** Sillamy (1999) defines as "A state of stress generated by a violent emotional event, psychological aggression, dangerous situations, or natural disasters, through which the traumatized individual re-experiences the traumatic event in the form of nightmares or recurring images, remains in a state of alertness and hypervigilance, and may sometimes experience feelings of guilt and proximity to death" (Sillamy, 1999, p. 205).

Al-Hawajri (2003) defines it as "The direct psychological and social effects—both short- and long-term—of severely stressful events, as well as the factors and domains influencing and associated with them, such as domestic violence, wars, disasters, accidents, and crimes" (Al-Hawajri, 2003, p. 81).

**Theoretical Definition (PTSD):** Is a psychological condition that may affect individuals as a result of distressing and painful events or experiences. These events are retained in the individual's memory and are reactivated, producing psychological, emotional, and behavioral disturbances due to the pressure generated by such traumatic experiences.

**Dramatic Character:** Ibrahim Fathi (1986) defines as "The totality of traits and features that constitute the nature of a person or a living being" (Ibrahim Fathi, 1986, p. 210).

Hanan Kassab (1997) defines it in *The Theatrical Dictionary* as "A being created by artistic imagination that performs a role or action based on imitation" (Kassab, 1997, p. 269).

**Theoretical Definition:** The dramatic character represents an integration of traits, features, and actions that interact and conflict with past events, generating present and future reactions. Through this process, the playwright and director construct the character as a sensory being with a coherent and unified structure.

**Operational Definition:** The dramatic character is a set of traits and attributes embodied in physical, social, and psychological dimensions, which undergo a continuous process of interaction with a specific event or a series of events. In seeking truth and meaning, the character experiences difficulty in enjoying life and engaging in daily activities, resulting in psychological distress that may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder.



## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders

Throughout life, individuals experience states of fear and insecurity arising from various situations. However, certain conditions generate persistent apprehension over time and produce reactions resulting from psychological pressure, which affect social and professional life in general. Psychologists have classified Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—as defined by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980—as a psychological disorder and diagnostic condition that appears across different population groups, particularly among children and adolescents.

PTSD has also been addressed in studies under terms such as traumatic neurosis and external psychological stressors. One of the earliest references to the psychological impact of trauma can be traced to Ibn Sina (Avicenna) in his scientific experiment involving the association of a lamb and a wolf placed at a distance within the same enclosure. Over time, symptoms of trauma appeared in the lamb, including fear, wasting, and physical deterioration, eventually leading to death. Ibn Sina stated that *"all plant, animal, and human actions arise from forces that exceed the physical body and the nature of temperament"* (Bernard-Carra Defoe, 2020, p. 133).

The researcher identifies studies indicating that post-traumatic stress manifests in different forms, including:

1. Recurrent Trauma:

This occurs continuously, leading to social numbness and defensive adaptation against danger as a result of repeated exposure to the same traumatic event. Examples include recurring wars and continuous exposure to political conflict.

2. Non-Recurrent Trauma:

In this type, post-traumatic symptoms emerge as a result of a single, intense, and unexpected event that occurs once in an individual's life and remains deeply embedded in memory. The researcher notes several contributing factors that significantly facilitate the emergence of PTSD:

- Gender and age factors, with symptoms appearing more frequently among children, particularly females.
- Pre-existing psychological symptoms that exacerbate the disorder.
- External stressors that compel individuals to adopt coping mechanisms.
- Suspicious or paranoid personality traits characterized by persistent doubt toward life experiences.
- Genetic and biological factors, including heightened sensitivity.

### 2.2 Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

As previously noted, symptoms often appear after a period of time, triggered by the retrieval of traumatic memories. Memory plays a central role in connecting present experiences with past events. The social environment may either help mitigate the effects of trauma or exacerbate them, leading to heightened anger, increased aggressive behavior both verbal and physical and, in some cases, suicidal ideation.

These symptoms do not resolve the underlying trauma; rather, they result in confusion, impaired concentration, and cognitive disorganization. In summary, PTSD symptoms include *"intense fear, terror, feelings of helplessness, avoidance of reminders associated with the traumatic event or its terrifying atmosphere, accompanied by depression, sadness, sleep disturbances, alienation, and social isolation. These conditions affect the patient's ability to perform tasks, fulfill occupational roles, and engage in daily life normally"* (Abdulrahim, p. 107).

Psychologists have developed PTSD assessment scales based on specific symptoms, including physiological indicators such as excessive sweating, elevated heart rate, rapid breathing, and high blood pressure. Emotional and cognitive symptoms are defined as *"emotional shock, anger, grief, feelings of oppression, depression, confusion in thinking,*



*decreased levels of concentration and attention, difficulty in decision-making, and dysfunction in memory processes” (Ismail, 2016, p. 18).*

Several theories have sought to explain Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, including biological, psychological, and cognitive interpretations, as outlined below:

### **2.2.1 Post-Traumatic Stress as a Biological Interpretation**

From a biological perspective, PTSD is explained as a change in the neural activity transmitters within the individual’s body. This leads to increased blood pressure, heightened anger, and pronounced violent reactions due to excessive secretion of adrenal glands, which are directly associated with psychological trauma.

### **2.2.2 Post-Traumatic Stress as a Psychological Interpretation**

Psychologist Sigmund Freud interpreted PTSD as originating from the moment of birth, which he termed “birth trauma.” This trauma is associated with the newborn’s sensation of suffocation and continues throughout life as a persistent feeling of anxiety related to survival. Psychological studies further indicate that PTSD may result from wars, oppression, childhood experiences, and the immediacy of the traumatic event itself.

Accordingly, *“the individual suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder is characterized by continuous thinking about the trauma, recurring nightmares, and a desire to repeat childhood traumas as a means of relieving painful anxiety and tension” (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974, p. 465).*

### **2.2.3 Post-Traumatic Stress as a Cognitive Interpretation**

Cognitive mental processes undoubtedly undergo post-traumatic stages due to reactive responses toward multiple situations. From a cognitive standpoint, PTSD can be treated and recovered from overtime through five sequential stages:

1. Source of Stress: Objective exposure to the traumatic event, which constitutes the primary factor causing trauma.
2. Self-Perception: The individual’s experience and its relationship to the traumatic situation, shaped by their informational and cognitive network.
3. Memory Activation: The intrusion of trauma and attempts to process and analyze traumatic memories.
4. Escape and Avoidance: A directed strategy in response to intrusive memories.
5. Recovery: The presence of a solution-processing network related to the biological functioning of the body. Activating this informational network contributes to reducing avoidance and escape behaviors; otherwise, psychological symptoms persist (Barlow, 2002, p. 128).

## **2.3 The Dramatic Character and Its Dimensions in the School Theatre Text**

The concept of character is comprehensive and inclusive. It represents a human entity that may assume the form of creatures, beings, or any imagined element, provided that it functions as a character capable of change over time, while its inner content remains complex and open to interpretation. The dynamic nature of this structure grants the character a distinctive individuality. The dramatic character experiences this dynamism in accordance with the sequence of events within the text and their significance, as these elements converge to define the character’s dimensions and, at times, their fluctuations. Such dynamics often arise through moments of surprise that intensify events and lead the character into multiple, profound, and complex traumatic experiences.

This approach distances the theatrical work from monotonous scenes and excessive verbosity, as mere physical movement devoid of dramatic motivation lacks genuine significance. As Raymond Hall (2012) notes, *“actors may stand, sit, move back and forth across the stage, or shift right and left, with the director intending to vary the visual composition perceived by the audience; however, such movements do not constitute real dramatic action and hold little value” (p. 261).* Accordingly, the structural construction of



the dramatic character must be approached through its three fundamental dimensions: physical, social, and psychological.

- 1. The Physical Dimension:** This dimension refers to the character's corporeal presence, which belongs to biological and organic aspects and forms an integral part of human behavior. It becomes embedded in the character's actions and conduct according to the life patterns experienced over time.
- 2. The Social Dimension:** The character's structure is fundamentally grounded in the social dimension, which contributes to shaping a balanced and coherent personality. This does not negate the importance of other dimensions biological, emotional, or cognitive, as any imbalance or dysfunction may lead to disorders that influence the character's trajectory and behavior. The social dimension is significant in terms of the character's relationship with others within historical and cultural contexts, as well as in understanding customs, traditions, and reciprocal interactions between the character and their social environment.
- 3. The Psychological Dimension:** Emotions such as jealousy, anger, tendencies, inclinations, and goals generate essential psychological interaction and represent manifestations of human behavior. This perspective aligns with Sigmund Freud's psychological theory of personality, which conceptualizes the self as an interaction among the id, ego, and superego. Freud regarded the ego as a relatively fragile entity that mediates between the id and the superego to serve the external world. He states that "*the ego inhabits an intermediate zone between the external world and the id, compelling the id to submit to the demands of reality and employing mental activity to modify the world in accordance with the wishes of the id; in reality, it behaves much like a physician*" (Freud, 1982, p. 89).

From this perspective, psychological balance is achieved through these regulating mechanisms. The researcher argues that the dramatic character's effectiveness begins when a disturbance disrupts this balance, producing trauma and subsequent post-traumatic effects. Writing and staging school theatre texts require several interconnected elements to construct a dramatic character with integrated dimensions, whether the character suffers from psychological imbalance or represents a well-adjusted personality. The dramatic character develops through structural composition and intertwined conflicts between cognition and action. As Sabri Saleh Mohammed (2007) asserts, "*when conflict originates within the character's mental struggle, the character becomes more significant than other dramatic values*" (p. 73). Drama, therefore, is fundamentally shaped through the sound construction of the dramatic character, enabling the audience to comprehend its purpose and meaning.

The researcher concludes that the diversity of a character's dimensions is closely linked to the character's actions within the present moment, as well as to environmental, cultural, and contextual factors surrounding it. Emotional stimulation arises through confrontation with circumstances and traumatic experiences. A successful character is one that exhibits varied responses to trauma; these differences often become more complex when decisive choices are required. Herein lies the essence of the character's internal conflict and the emergence of post-traumatic stress symptoms because of the experiences endured.

#### **2.4 Indicators of the Theoretical Framework**

1. The dramatic character becomes the focal point of psychological trauma beginning from the moment of reaction, producing symptoms identified as post-traumatic stress.
2. Post-traumatic stress manifests as psychological and behavioral fluctuations resulting from the pressure generated by traumatic events.
3. The dramatic character, across its various dimensions, is associated with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from biological, psychological, cognitive, and social perspectives.



4. Post-traumatic emotions represent effects that may be either explicit or latent, arising from violence, wars, crimes, and distressing events.
5. Intrusive memories, isolation, emotional numbing (loss of sadness and joy), and episodes of tension and anger emerge as consequences of traumatic experiences.
6. Difficulty concentrating, attentional distraction, increased heart rate, and shortness of breath are among the symptoms affecting the dramatic character as a result of exposure to traumatic situations.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Procedures**

To achieve the objective of the present study—namely, to explore post-traumatic emotions and identify their impact on the dramatic character in the school theatre text—the researcher undertook a set of research procedures summarized as follows:

#### **3.2 Research Method**

The researcher adopted the descriptive approach using the content analysis method in designing the research procedures. This method was selected as the most appropriate scientific approach for identifying the relationship between the research problem, *What are post-traumatic stress disorders, and what is their impact on the dramatic character in the school theatre text?*, and the results that fulfill the objectives of the present study.

#### **3.3 Research Population**

The research population consists of school theatre texts presented for the 16–17 age group, based on the following justifications:

1. This developmental stage demonstrates a higher level of maturity and comprehension, enabling students to understand complex ideas and information that may generate post-traumatic effects within the dramatic character.
2. Theatre texts at this stage tend to be more complex, as they address realistic problems and characters that mirror lived reality. These topics are more sensitive from psychological and social perspective and exert a stronger impact.

Accordingly, the researcher identified the following population:

1. *So That We Do Not Awaken the Dead* by Abdullah Jad'an (2017).
2. *After Judgment Day* by Ammar Na'ma Jaber (2019).
3. *The Enchanted Palace* by Talal Hassan (2023).
4. *The Wicked Woman* by Mohammed Al-Atabi (2023).

#### **3.4 Research Instrument**

The researcher relied on the key indicators derived from the theoretical framework, which were extracted from scientific sources and theoretical perspectives addressing the impact of post-traumatic stress on the dramatic character from biological, psychological, and cognitive dimensions. Based on these indicators, an analytical instrument appropriate to the dramatic character was developed and designed according to the following procedures:

1. The research instrument was divided into three sections corresponding to the dimensions of the dramatic character: the biological dimension, the psychological dimension, and the social dimension. Each dimension included specific indicators representing symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Appendix 1).
2. The role of the main or protagonist character in the theatrical performance was analyzed.
3. A three-point scale was employed to measure the impact of post-traumatic stress on the dramatic character: (*Never, Often, Always*).
4. The instrument was presented to a panel of experts in theatre and art education and subsequently adopted in its final validated form.



### 3.5 Analysis of the Research Sample

- Play Title: *So That We Do Not Awaken the Dead*
- Author: Abdullah Jad'an
- Year of Writing: 2017

#### 3.5.1 Theatrical Concept

The play *So That We Do Not Awaken the Dead* is a philosophical experimental text composed of a single act. The characters include: the Man, the Creature, the Mother's Voice, the Wife, the Child, and the Body Collective (the White Ghosts and the Black Ghosts).

The central idea of the play revolves around human conflict with the devastation produced by war, where the Man emerges as the sole survivor. He lives through a continuous struggle with post-traumatic stress, confronting darkness and ghostly presences that may also be interpreted as manifestations of his own aggressive perceptions and inner turmoil.

This violent and alienating reality, marked by a sense of identity loss, imagined images of the past, and fear of the present, drives the dramatic character to question life and death. Through the voices of the mother, the wife, and the child, the character clings to hope, dignity, and the will to survive, as if these figures represent emotional anchors and symbols of resistance against despair. This attachment becomes the sole means of challenge and the source of joy in holding on to life.

The play concludes with this existential affirmation, articulated by the Man when he declares:

*"We do everything we can so that we do not awaken the dead."*

#### 3.5.2 Statistical Methods

The researcher employed Fisher's equation (the weighted arithmetic mean) to determine the intensity of the items, as well as the percentage weight formula to describe each item of the research instrument and rank them. These procedures were used to calculate the highest level of intensity and to identify the impact of post-traumatic stress across the three dimensions (biological, psychological, and cognitive), in addition to determining the percentage for each item, as outlined below:

##### 1. Weighted Arithmetic Mean

$$\text{Weighted Mean} = \frac{(f_1 \times 3) + (f_2 \times 2) + (f_3 \times 1)}{N}$$

Where:

- $f$  = frequencies
- $N$  = total number of responses

##### 2. Percentage Weight Formula

$$\text{Percentage Weight} = \frac{\text{Weighted Mean} \times 100}{\text{Maximum Score}}$$

This formula was used to describe each item of the instrument and to determine its relative weight within the overall analysis.

### 4. Research Findings

#### 4.1 Results and Discussion

The aim of the present study is to explore post-traumatic emotions and identify their impact on the dramatic character in the school theatre text. This objective was achieved through content analysis of the research sample, which was selected using a purposive sampling method. Based on the analysis, the researcher derived the following key findings.



The analysis relied on three dimensions of the dramatic character psychological, social, and physical each associated with specific indicators and symptoms of post-traumatic stress, as follows:

1. **Psychological Dimension (44%)** This dimension recorded the highest percentage within the theatrical text. It is represented by factors centered on the characters' internal conflicts with the main character, the retrieval of painful memories, tension, anxiety, and existential fear, in addition to disturbing dreams and emotional instability. Internal dialogue and psychological tension dominate the character's behavior, reflecting the depth of the psychological crisis associated with memories of death and the struggle to preserve life.
2. **Social Dimension (36%)** This dimension ranked at a moderate level and was manifested through social isolation and weakened human relationships. The character experiences a loss of genuine communication with others and a sense of alienation within society, reflecting the fragmentation of social bonds. The impact of trauma generates post-traumatic symptoms that reveal loneliness and separation.
3. **Physical Dimension (20%)** This dimension recorded the lowest percentage compared to the other dimensions. Physical exhaustion, as reflected in the preceding dimensions, places the character in a state of diminished self-confidence, neglect of external appearance, and reduced physical energy. These manifestations represent complementary symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and further illustrate the character's suffering.

#### 4.2 Conclusions

Based on the findings of the present study, the researcher has drawn a set of scientific and artistic conclusions, which may be summarized as follows:

1. The psychological dimension dominated the manifestations of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, reflecting an intellectual vision that prioritizes human consciousness, whereby psychological disturbance functions as the primary driving force of events within the theatrical text.
2. The interaction between the psychological and social dimensions resulted in disrupted social communication and the fragility of genuine human relationships.
3. The physical dimension reflected the character's inner state, indicating that the body within the theatrical text is not an independent element but rather a mirror of psychological and social conditions.
4. Existential life issues reveal the depth of human inner suffering—such as existential anxiety and fear of loss—more profoundly than external action or objective events.
5. The reliance on symbolism and the introduction of imaginary characters within the theatrical text achieved intellectual depth and transformed Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder into a conceptual and symbolic signifier, thereby enhancing the dramatic character's role as an active agent in generating layered meanings.
6. The dimensions of the dramatic character are intentionally interwoven as a deliberate dramatic strategy rather than a random construction, serving the dramatic structure and intensifying the impact of trauma and its post-traumatic consequences.
7. The text presents a comprehensive human image, emphasizing the universal human dimension by portraying the individual with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder at moments of existential vulnerability, thus granting the text a significance that transcends time and place.

#### 4.3 Recommendations

In light of the conclusions reached, the researcher recommends the following:

1. When writing school theatre texts, greater emphasis should be placed on deepening the psychological dimension of the dramatic character through focusing on internal conflict, thereby achieving narrative balance while avoiding direct explanation in favor of suggestion and implication.



2. Memory should be employed as a dramatic tool to reveal the effects of post-traumatic stress by linking past and present through non-linear structures that articulate the full range of human inner emotions.
3. School theatre writing should take into account students' psychological needs and address social issues that influence them directly or indirectly, while maintaining strong humanistic and ethical considerations.
4. Playwrights of school theatre should open the horizon of interpretation for the audience by leaving space for contemplation, reflection, and critical thinking, thereby fostering intellectually and psychologically interactive engagement.
5. Individual experience should be treated as a mirror reflecting the suffering of a broader human or social group, a perspective that is particularly important in writing school theatre texts for the secondary education stage.

#### 4.5 Recommendations Research

The researcher proposes conducting the following complementary studies:

- Representations of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the construction of contemporary dramatic character.
- Deconstructing traumatic memory in school theatre performances.
- The body as a visual discourse of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in contemporary theatrical performance.

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#### Appendix (1):

##### Research Instrument in Its Final Form

No.	Dramatic Character Dimensions	Indicators / Variables	Never	Often	Always
1	<b>Physical (Biological) Dimension</b>	Lack of concern for external appearance			
		Difficulty sleeping			
		Difficulty imagining living for a long period accompanied by episodes of pain			
		Shortness of breath			
		Excessive sweating and rapid heartbeat			
2	<b>Social Dimension</b>	Fear of recurring events			



		Avoidance of thoughts and emotions			
		Inability to enjoy daily activities			
		Social isolation			
		Lack of love toward others			
		Loss of the feeling of sadness (emotional numbness)			
3	<b>Psychological Dimension</b>	The character imagines images from the past			
		Disturbing dreams			
		Tension and anger			
		Difficulty concentrating			
		Expectation of negative future events			