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UNHEALED WOUNDS: THE INSCRIPTION OF TRAUMA IN BASHARAT PEER'S *CURFEWED NIGHT* AND SHAHNAZ BASHIR'S *THE HALF MOTHER*

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Abstract

Kashmir once known for its majestic beauty and harmony on earth has now been discussed as a bloody conflict zone since 1989, which turned this heaven into man made hell. During this period, a full-fledged freedom struggle and resistance movement began in the valley of Kashmir. The root cause of the movement was the rigged election of 1987. The ongoing ambivalence had made the life of its inhabitants miserable. It is because of this conflict the people of Kashmir suffered both physically and mentally and history testify the fact. Bodily wounds can be noticed but mental wounds in the form of trauma, anxiety and depression usually go unnoticed. Basharat Peer and Shahnaz Bashir in their respective novels *Curfewed Night* and *The Half Mother* have attempted to paint the sufferings, pain, trauma and other psychological disorders in Kashmiri people generated because of the conflict, based on their own experience and reminiscences. In this regard, both *Curfewed Night* and *The Half Mother* act as trauma narratives. The paper therefore, attempts to explore trauma and mental agony embedded in Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* and Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*.

Key Words: Kashmir, Conflict, Trauma, Curfewed Night, The Half Mother.

Discussion

The word trauma is derived from the Greek word 'traumatikos' which means wound or injury. It was used to refer to bodily wound but nowadays the word is used to describe psychological trauma instead of physical. Trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, "is an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). W.J.T. Mitchell states that, "Trauma, like God, is supposed to be unrepresentable in word and image" (Mitchell 60). Trauma became one of the important frameworks for literary works from 1990, but was used long before by Sigmund Freud in 1895 as a concept of belatedness or nachtraglich, which means a temporary or permanent period of amnesia followed by traumatic shock. Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* describes trauma as, "any excitations from outside which is powerful enough to break through the protective shield" (Freud 301).

The relentless war and conflict of Kashmir began in the late 1980's which turned to be very a complex socio-political period in the history of Kashmir. This conflict has affected the people of Kashmir both physically and mentally. It has created great chaos in the lives of people, living in Kashmir. As a consequence of this unending conflict, there was political unrest, massacres, beating, chaos, disappearances,



curfew, crackdown, killings, rapes, arbitrary arrests and trauma. In *Kashmir in Conflict*, Victoria Schofield writes about the peak years of uprising that began in 1989, “Since 1989, the Kashmiris have lived in fear of gun, whether it is that of militants or the Indian security forces. Their sons, as militants, suspected militants or sympathisers, have been arrested, tortured, killed or just disappeared” (Schofield 182). She further writes, “For the majority of the people, the ill-effects of living under siege have been tremendous. Although there have been no floods and the harvests have been good, no one has yet been able to evaluate the trauma of events on their lives since 1989” (182). Naseer Ahmad Naseer also writes about the dreadful traumatic events of the period, “It was the age of bloodshed, chaos, confusion, turmoil, crackdown, frisking, gun battles, mine blasts, improvised explosive devices (IED), mourning, burning of houses, demolition of the mosques and shrines and so on” (Naseer 125).

The period of the 90’s in Kashmir was the most horrible period which provoked many people to present the brutality and violence of that period in literature. Many educated people from Kashmir are interrupting their stories in the conflict disruption and gave us an accurate panorama of the situation. The resistance which began in the late 1980’s can be seen in the writings of Agha Shahid Ali, Basharat Peer, Arundhati Roy, Mirza Waheed, Shahnaz Bashir, Nyla Ali Khan, Nitasha Koul, Lalita Pandit, Siddhartha Gigoo, Tej Nath Dhar, and so on. Agha Shahid Ali, an American-Kashmiri poet was the first English writer from Kashmir. Being an intense witness of chaos and pain imposed upon Kashmir, his poetry makes us glum by narrating the pain and trauma of his motherland through his poetry. The year 1989 (when the revolt broke against Indian forces), left an ineradicable mark on his psyche and he notes down:

The city from where no news can come

Is now so visible in its curfewed night

That the worst is precise: From Zero Bridge

A shadow chased by searchlights is running

Away to find its body. On the edge

Of the Cantonment, where Gupkar Road ends,

It shrinks almost into nothing, is



Nothing by interrogation gates

So it can slip, unseen, into the cells:

Drippings from a suspended burning tire

Are falling on the back of a prisoner,

The naked boy screaming, "I know nothing" ... (Ali 178)

Being pioneer representative from the valley of Kashmir to the literary world, Agha Shahid Ali, ended the long-lasting voicelessness and narrated through his poetry the situation of 1990's in the following lines:

And hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners

Left behind, as they ran from the funeral,

Victims of the firing. From windows we hear

Grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall

On us like ash. Black on us of flames

It cannot extinguish the neighbourhoods

The homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers

Kashmir is burning. (179)

Many indigenous voices from Kashmir, in their own creative way, highlighted the pain and sufferings of the Kashmiri people in order to bring worldwide attention. Their literary works are full of grief, pain, alienation, anger, and traumatic expressions. Suvir Kaul believes that the contemporary English writers of Kashmir are responsible and sensitive. Their works articulate traumatic incidents and episodes that took place in the lives of Kashmiri people in which stress is laid upon human and experiential relations. Kaul writes, "the particular circumstances of trauma demand an affective response that registers the emotional dimensions of the original" (Kaul 72). All contemporary English writers of Kashmir are portraying the picture of war and conflict through their writings and highlighted the issue of the trauma of Kashmiri people. Basharat Peer, a Kashmiri journalist, started the trend of Kashmiri English prose by writing a memoir, *Curfewed Night* in



2008. In *Curfewed Night*, Peer confesses that every conflict-ridden zone has its own literature but there was none from his motherland Kashmir regarding English prose writings to chronicle the trauma and pain. He writes:

People from almost every conflict zone had told their stories: Palestinians, Israelis, Bosnians, Kurds, Tibetans, Lebanese, East Germans, Africans, East Timorese, and many more. I felt the absence of our own telling, the unwritten books about the Kashmiri experience, from the bookshelves, as vividly as the absence of a beloved- the empty chair staring at you across the table in the coffee shop... I knew I had to write. And to write, I also had to return and revisit the people and places that had haunted me for years. (Peer 95-96)

Shahnaz Bashir, the winner of the Muse India Award for young writers, is another indigenous voice from Kashmir. He in his debut novel *The Half Mother* also narrates the pain and trauma of Kashmiri women under the shadow of military barbarism. Both Basharat Peer and Shahnaz Bashir witnessed and experienced the peak years of military insurgency and militant uprising. Their debut novels *Curfewed Night* and *The Half Mother* critically chronicles the psychosis and trauma undergone by the Kashmiri people on the onslaught of military barbarism and violence. In simple and clear words, both writers explained the pain, sufferings, and tormenting memories of Kashmiri people which disturbed them psychologically. They portrayed how Kashmiri people developed serious psychotic disorders because of the ongoing conflict.

Basharat Peer, in his book *Curfewed Night*, analyses the psychological health of Kashmiri people by interviewing the victims and describing it in his book. He shifts his attention from one character to another. On the other hand, Shahnaz Bashir's novel *The Half Mother* revolves around his focal character Haleema, who represents every Kashmiri woman.

In *Curfewed Night*, Peer talks about the checkpoints and bunkers and how every passer-by is made to stop and asked to raise their arms to check their identity cards. He writes, "a soldier frisked them and checked their identity cards" (Peer 20). He also talks about his father's journey from office to home and the difficulties he faced while travelling. He remarks:

He stopped travelling in his official vehicle, as that would make him conspicuous. The journey from his office in Srinagar to our village, once a lovely two-hour ride through an enchanting landscape, had become a risky, life threatening affair. Almost every time he came home, it took him around five hours. On a lucky day his bus would only be stopped every fifteen minutes at a military checkpost, he and other passengers made to stand in a queue, their raised hands holding an identity card and anything they carried-books and



files in father's case. After a body search he would walk half a mile away from the checkpost and wait in another queue for the bus to arrive. (18)

In order to depress Kashmiri people mentally, 'wartime sexual violence' spread after the beginning of the military insurgency in Kashmir. Kashmiri women were raped by the Indian military and paramilitary forces as a means to humiliate and mutilate them. Peer also talks about this topic. He highlights the gang rape of Mubeena Ghani, a young bride, and her aunt from Chawalgam on the day of her wedding when she was on her way to her husband's home. He writes, "In May 1990, a few hours after her marriage, she had been raped by a group of Indian paramilitary soldiers" (150). He further depicts this incident in the following lines:

She was bleeding, when a group of soldiers dragged her and the chambermaid to the mustard fields beside the road. An unknown number of BSF men raped the two injured women. 'I could not even remember how many they were. I had lost my senses', Mubeena said. (154)

In the same way, he talks about the mass rape of more than twenty women in north Kashmir's two villages Kunan and Poshpura. He writes, "the village in the northern Kupwara where the Indian army raped more than twenty women in 1990" (156). These incidents produced a lot of trauma and psychological disorders among Kashmiri women. This followed what Jeffery Alexander describes as 'collective trauma'. He writes:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, making their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander 1)

Enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings were other reasons for psychological trauma among Kashmiri people during the period of the 90's. There are hundreds of men who were killed and thousands went missing. The Indian army without any tangible information and evidence took away the Kashmiri men from their homes only to separate them from their families forever. These enforced disappearances gave birth to half mothers and half widows as they are still in dilemma whether their loved ones are alive or dead and are waiting hopelessly for their loved ones to return. Peer highlights the issue of disappearance in the following lines:

Srinagar is also about being hidden from view, disappearing. Absences and their reminders stand at every other street... Between 4000 and 8000 men have disappeared after being arrested by the military,



paramilitary, and the police. Newspapers routinely refer to the missing men as ‘disappeared persons.’ And their waiting wives as ‘half-widows’. (Peer 131)

He further writes:

I happened to meet Noora, a seventy year old woman, in her run-down house near Lal Chowk. Her shop keeper son had stepped out to join his cricket team at the Polo Ground, a nearby cricket ground. Her neighbours saw a few BSF jeeps stop outside their house, near Ghanta Ghar, an old watchtower whose clock had stopped moving. The paramilitaries grabbed him, pushed him into the back of a jeep, and drove away. He had been missing for eight years when I met her in her dimly lit kitchen. ‘For a few years, my daughters and I went to every police station, every military camp, every politician we could. Everybody had ‘NO’ for us... (131-132)

Like Basharat Peer, Shahnaz Bashir also highlighted the issue of enforced disappearance in his novel *The Half Mother*. He also portrays how the hopeless waiting of Kashmiri daughters, wives, and mothers affects their mental health. He echoes the trauma and pain of the Kashmiri women in the form of ongoing conflict. He writes, “A daughter still waits for her father to wed her off. A wife searches for her husband. And a mother still pines for her son and waits for him to be a pallbearer when she dies” (Bashir 177). Haleema the focal character of the novel suffered throughout his life. She finds herself in mental distress and trauma after her son-Imran, was enforcedly disappeared by Indian paramilitary forces. The following lines show pain which she is going through in the reminiscence of her son:

The colour of everything is sorrow,

the colour of the moon is sorrow,

the colour of the streets is sorrow, and

the colour of memories is sorrow.

The colour of my heart, in its own heart, is sorrow.

The colour of my breath is sorrow,

the colour of sorrow is sorrow. (5)



He further highlights how endless waiting for her son is turning her psycho:

In my long solitary walks,

some times

I have imagined you as

someone,

distant to me,

somewhere,

walking in the middle of a lonely road,

then turning around

only to become

someone else.

Your face blurs,

tiring my eyes.

The night is tired now,

the old moon, hanging in the dark sky,

is tired too,

the roads are tired,

your footprints are tired,

the candle, the windows, the doors are tired-

I am still waiting,

Come now... (155-156)



For Haleema, losing her son was one of the traumatizing experiences. Her dreams are shattered and she had lost her every hope because of this emotional jolt. Romeo Vitelli writes, “The emotional blow associated with child loss can lead to wide range of psychological and physiological problems including depression, anxiety, cognitive and physical symptoms” (Vitelli 1). Haleema has not only lost her son, she has lost her father- Ab Jaan, Ghulam Rasool Joo also. Her father Ab Jaan, was slaughtered by Indian paramilitary forces in front of her eyes. Ab Jaan’s death also made a traumatic impact on Haleema. Bashir describes the incident of Ab Jaan’s death in the following lines:

Three bullets were pumped into Ab Jaan. One in the neck. One in the heart. One in the stomach. The rapid staccato startled the birds in the plum tree. ‘Sisterfucker!’ Kushwaha said after killing Ab Jaan, the fevered barrel of his rifle still smoking. Haleema frenetically slapped her face and chest and pulled her hair. Blood began to gurgle out Ab Jaan’s throat. She fainted. The entire neighbourhood was now watching from their rooftops, verandahs and windows. Men and boys jumped off and rushed to help. Major Kushwaha cocked his gun. His men followed and pointed their guns at the people who tried to come towards the Joos. Women of the neighbourhood wailed from their rooftops and verandahs and pummelled their chests. The major fired some warning shots. ‘No one will come here. Whoever does shall meet the same fate!’ he announced. (Bashir 49)

Bashir highlights the brutality of the Indian military and paramilitary forces through the character of Major Kushwaha and the helplessness of a daughter whose father has been killed in front of her. The death of her father traumatizes Haleema so much that she lost her senses, had no tears in her eyes, her hair was loose, beating herself and laughing like a psycho. Bashir puts it as:

The women tried to prevent Haleema from hurting herself. She was conscious now and in shock. She wanted the women to tell her Ab Jaan was still alive. ‘Please don’t cry. My Ab Jaan is alive. Isn’t he? Isn’t he? He is alive. Why are you all crying?’ She requested the women. Her tears had dried. The skin beneath her throat was red from chest-thumping. Her cheeks had the imprints of her own slaps. Her hair fell loose over her face. She laughed, and then abruptly ran towards a wall barefooted to bang her head. The women rushed to stop her. She rubbed her heels against the earth. (50)

On a similar note, Peer remarks a hapless mother- Shameema, whose one son- Shafi, was killed by Indian paramilitary forces and the other-Bilal, was about to be sent into the house with a mine in his hand. He quotes Shameema’s words:



God gave me courage that day. I fought with every soldier who tried to stop me. Normally you are scared of soldiers, but I did not stop that day till I reached the house where the encounter was going on.’ ... ‘I saw Bilal from a distance but Shafi was missing,’ ... ‘I ran towards Bilal... Bilal hugged her and said that the soldiers had sent Shafi inside the militants’ house with a mine in his hands. (Peer 168-169)

Shameema continuously fought with the paramilitary forces and somehow managed to save his son-Bilal. From that very day, Bilal is psychologically disturbed. And to calm him down she provides him hookah. Peer illustrates this incident in the following lines:

A wail rose from the other corner of the verandah. Her thirteen year old son was crying. She hugged and patted him and consoled him saying I was here to help with Bilal’s job. Then she lit the hookah and gave it to him, as if it was a feeder. He puffed violently and stared at me. Shameema told me that he is psychologically disturbed. He had been in the same school as Shafi and would run from his classroom to cry outside the house where Shafi was killed. His condition has worsened and he refused to go to school... But every time Shafi is mentioned, he is agitated. Which mother would pass a hookah to her son? But I have to, it calms him down’. (170)

Dr. Mushtaq Margoob, renowned and leading Kashmiri psychiatrist says that, “Before 1989, there were no PTSD {Post Traumatic Stress Disorder} cases, but now we have an epidemic of disorders in Kashmir” (qtd. in Aljazeera, 2016). Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub explain that trauma survivors are incapable in order to make a sense of incidents that comes at the time of trauma. They put it as:

Trauma survivors live not only with memories of past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure... The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch with either the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and there by remains entrapped in both. (Felman and Laub 69)

Kashmir has been witnessing torture since 1989. Physical torture is an everyday occurrence in Kashmir. The methods for physical torture are barbaric which results in the biological and mental impairment of the victims. Peer describes how physical torture left a long-lasting mark on the psyche of victims. He quotes Ansar-a torture survivor:

‘How can I forget it? Not even stray cows would eat the food they threw at us there... You do not live a normal life after that torture. It scars you forever’ ... ‘They beat us up with guns, staffs, hands. But that was



nothing.’ His voice had no emotion and he talked as he was reading from a manual. ‘They took you out to the lawn outside the building. You were asked to remove your clothes, even your underwear. They tied you to a long wooden ladder and placed it near a ditch filled with kerosene oil and red chilli powder. They raised the ladder like a seesaw and pushed your head into the ditch. It could go on for an hour, half an hour, depending on their mood. (Peer 123)

Apart from physical torture the Indian military and paramilitary forces tortured the Kashmiri people psychologically in their torture houses. Peer quotes Shafi- another torture survivor, “The worst part was the psychological torture. They would make us say Jai Hind every morning and evening. They beat you if you refused” (142). Both physical and psychological torture leads to prolonged mental problems in the inhabitants of Kashmir. The torture survivors remain mentally disturbed throughout their life.

Conclusion

To conclude we must say that both novels are perfect examples of trauma narration. Throughout the novels, both writers bring fore the tales of trauma as well as harsh realities of violence, disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and rapes against the people of Kashmir which highlight the injustice done by the government of India and the Indian military and paramilitary forces. Going through the pages of both novels not only makes you glum about the sufferings of the Kashmiri people but also makes you aware of the brutalities of Indian military and paramilitary forces. Both Basharat Peer and Shahnaz Bashir helped us to understand oppression and show resistance to give hope.



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