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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the fictional works of two contemporary authors i.e. Shahnaz Bashir and Toni Morrison through the lens of trauma theory. The main argument is that both Bashir and Morrison use fiction as a means to articulate the traumatic history of their ostracized communities –Kashmiri and African American people respectively. One novel of each novelist, i.e The Half Mother (2014) and Beloved (1987) has been chosen for analysis. Utilizing the conceptual framework presented by Cathy Caruth, this research endeavors to explore how the trauma-hit protagonists, Haleema and Sethe, endure the havoc of troubled histories. The study attempts to see how far the flashback of the traumatic memories of Sethe and Haleema contribute to record the factual history of African Americans and Kashmiris. The secondary argument is that both novels are chiefly characterized with key tenets of trauma theory as the authors present the haunting pasts and hallucinations of the protagonists. The study first delineates trauma,

and then goes on to focus on its critical aspects. It further explores how memory and history function in the selected works. Both authors belong to two different geographical locations but have used fiction to articulate historically traumatizing events. The research is interdisciplinary in nature as it draws upon the disciplines of literature, history and literary theory. In the works of Morrison and Bashir, literature functions as a site for an overdue representation of an unclaimed instant of trauma.

Keywords: trauma, fiction, history, memory, community

Introduction

The term ‘trauma fiction’ sounds somewhat contested; because trauma as an overpowering experience of an individual seems to repel verbal or linguistic representation, then how can it be recounted in a narrative. This study, however, strives to propose that there are numerous ways of discerning the relation between fiction and trauma. The emergence of trauma theory has provided literary authors with newfangled means of theorizing trauma and moved attention away from the inquiry of what is recalled of the history to how and why it is evoked. In contemporary times, literary artists belonging to numerous cultural groups are striving to represent their historical traumatic experiences through fiction. Literary authors belonging to South Asia, especially India and Pakistan have focused on the most traumatic event in the history of their nations in Partition literature, Afghan authors have documented the troubled history of their country through their works of arts, similarly, novelists belonging to the Middle East have also recounted the troubled history of their land through their narratives. Other than these areas the fictional works produced by the authors of African - American and Kashmiri descent are also significant in this category. In the selected novels we can see that Toni Morrison endeavors to gain political acknowledgment for the sufferings of her community through her novel *Beloved*, on the other hand, Shahnaz Bashir

focuses on the traumatic experience of his community during the never-ending resistance movement. The aim of this study is to analyze both these works as examples of trauma fiction.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The term ‘trauma fiction’ has a long history at its back as it journeyed from medical to scientific discourse and ultimately entered the field of literary studies. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) entered the psychiatric and medical fields during the 1980s. Unrelenting political demonstrations of the Vietnam veterans resulted in formal recognition of PTSD. These soldiers protested against the continuance of the Vietnam war. This remonstrance expanded and spread throughout the US; groups belonging to all walks of life joined this drive. “These groups served a dual purpose: to raise public awareness about the effects of the war and to offer support and counseling to returning soldiers”¹. Psychiatric research were conducted to delineate PTSD and to analyze the traumatic influences of the war on the combatants, these researches concluded that there was a direct relationship between war exposure and PTSD. The American Psychiatric Association admitted that “a psychiatric disorder could be wholly environmentally determined and that traumatic event occurring in adulthood could have lasting psychological consequences” (ibid. p. 04).

However, the cultural and ethical inferences of the field arose in the United States during the 1990s. This decade is significant in the history of trauma studies because during this decade trauma studies emerged as a field of cultural research. The interest of researchers in literature and trauma studies prompted them to explore how traumatic events are depicted through fiction. Trauma theory facilitates understanding the multiple modes through which

¹ Whitehead, Anne. (2004). *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

traumatic events are described or suppressed in historical and literary texts. Trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman and Shoshana Felman were all trained at Yale University under Paul de Man. Each one of these theorists took a turn from literary theory to trauma studies.

Cathy Caruth edited *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* in 1995. In this volume, she included interviews of people belonging to different fields i.e. filmmakers, literary theorists, sociologists and psychiatrists to emphasize the cross-disciplinary nature of trauma. Caruth's notion of trauma was influenced by Freud's perception of traumatic incidents presented in his publications titled *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). He introduced the idea of traumatic neurosis in his works, which was later officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) as Post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is a crucial notion regarding trauma theory which Caruth defines as a reaction to events that can take the shape of varying intrusive symptoms including dreams, hallucinations, etc. which consequentially, lead to the possession of the victim by that certain incident (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). The etymology of the term "trauma" comes from the Greek word meaning "wound" (Lukhurst, 2008, p.3). The interpretation of the term varies according to the subject and context of the study, but all disciplines agree that trauma is a highly severe type of psychological wound. Trauma does not necessarily involve any particular physical symptoms but it may result in the production of repetitive, incalculable and persistent effects that continue for a long time even after the major cause has lapsed. The study of trauma has spread over various disciplines beyond psychology resulting in making it profoundly interdisciplinary in nature. The versatility of trauma theory can be observed from the fact that trauma is not only studied in classic disciplines such as the humanities and the sciences but it is also focused upon by the student of law and medicine as well. Nevertheless, the concept of trauma eludes precise definition as well

as categorization as it is impossible to characterize it in simple terms.

By examining and exploring the accounts of trauma survivors, this field of study probes into the unrecorded versions of history. According to Caruth, “The traumatized, we might say carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.” (Caruth, 1995, p. 5). This study has been prompted by the contemporaneous interest in Comparative literature and Trauma Studies. In contemporary times boundaries of various disciplines have been challenged and questioned. The same goes true for literature and psychology. This study uses trauma theory to assess the maternal narratives of Sethe and Haleema to testify the redemptive nature of fiction in private and collective healing. This article further investigates the interconnections between personal and historical trauma. Both Bashir and Morrison define historical trauma through indigenous dispossession. The historical trauma of the African-Americans and Kashmiris plays itself out in the form of the breakdown of the mother-child relationship. Specifically, the mother figures of Sethe and Haleema register the damage in the social environments of the texts. Both female protagonists cope with emotional issues throughout the text, they are victims of social and political violence. This study reads *The Half Mother* and *Beloved* as narratives that record the untold histories of the African American and Kashmiri community. Community and testimony are important aspects of trauma so this study investigates these aspects to see how they function in the novels of Bashir and Morrison.

Brief Sketch of the Novels

Toni Morrison’s fifth novel *Beloved* is set in Ohio. Morrison records the sufferings of a slave family during the American Civil War and the Reconstruction era. The story is about a slave woman Sethe who kills her own daughter to save her from the brutalities of slavery.

Through Sethe's life history, Morrison paints the gloomy and powerful portrait of the dehumanizing effects of slavery as well as the lingering damage inflicted on its survivors. The novel's plot is inspired by an actual incident in which an African American slave mother murdered her own daughter rather than allowing her to spend the inhuman life of a slave. The story is partly realistic, however, partly it is a ghost story that elucidates the impacts of slavery on the psychological conditions of the slaves, especially women. Through Sethe's story, Morrison narrates a personal story that sheds light on the greater questions of cultural and communal problems. Sethe's story becomes a ghost story after her encounter with Beloved. The author reveals the narratives in fragmented flashbacks that take the reader back into Sethe's past and explain the cause of the conflicts in her present.

Sethe runs away from the plantation along with her children and once she is caught by the overseers, tries to kill all her children rather than allowing them to go back to the *Sweet Home*. But she only manages to kill one daughter called Beloved and the rest of the children are rescued by the overseers. Later on, explaining her stance she explains that her love for her children compelled her to kill them because she did not want them to experience the same trauma she encountered at the plantation. However, when Sethe meets Beloved eighteen years after the incident, many occurrences make her believe that she is her dead daughter so at the heart of her heart she is delighted, though partly guilty as well. She cuts off her ties with the outside world and tries to give full attention to her daughter Beloved. This act of Sethe shows her remorse as a mother. Initially, she spends a good time with both her daughters; Denver and Beloved but with time her guilt prompts her to ask for forgiveness. She explains her sufferings to Beloved and how much she had to endure for her children. However, one-day Beloved disappears and never returns back. The text ends with Sethe still grieving for her daughter.

Toni Morrison is a contemporary author who has not witnessed slavery herself but writes on behalf of her community. But the other selected author, Shahnaz Bashir is a Kashmiri author who has spent all his life in the valley. He himself witnessed the turbulent 1990s in the valley. His debut novel *The Half Mother* is set in the 1990s Kashmir. The novel addresses the grave issue of the involuntary disappearances of young men in the valley. The narrative starts with Haleema's childhood. She spends a miserable childhood as her father does not have a consistent job, however, her family assumes that she will have a comfortable life once she gets married. But this hope does not come true because her marriage only lasts for three months. She breaks away from her husband after learning that he has affair with a nurse. The only happy memory that she has of this marriage is her son Imran whom she raises as a single mother. But her happiness does not last long. Like many Kashmiri mothers of her time, Haleema also lives under constant fear of losing her son. Though the author describes Haleema's life as a contend mother for some time but this does not last long. Indian army stationed in the district is attacked by Mujahedeen (armed rebels) and as a reaction, the army exercises its anger against the local civilians. During an army raid, Haleema's father is killed and her son Imran is abducted by the Indian army. She is doubly traumatized by this incident as she has to grieve for her dead father (who is killed by the Indian Army during the raid) and also search for her son. She struggles to find her son at every army camp in hope of finding her son but she never finds him. The text narrates not just the story of a single mother but every mother in Kashmir who is living under uncertain conditions and is not sure what is going to happen the next day.

Both protagonists Sethe and Haleema fight against all odds in hope of getting rid of their sufferings. Both authors narrate the trauma of a mother losing her child and how they cope with it. Both texts are situated geographically and temporally apart yet the trauma of a mother is a bond that prompted this research. One mother lost her

child because she herself killed her to save her from the sufferings of slavery on the other hand a mother loses her child because of the troubled political situation of her homeland. Both texts share not just the trauma of mothers but also the uncertain condition in which the mother is unsure about the present condition of her child and does not know for sure if the child is dead or alive.

Discussion and Analysis

Both selected novels start with the confrontation of the protagonists to their traumatic past. In *Beloved*, Sethe supposedly kills her daughter from the fear of slavery, whereas, in *The Half Mother*, Haleema's son is abducted by the Indian army. Both mothers i.e. Sethe and Haleema, are grief-stricken and their lives are in a state of disintegration. Both protagonists are shown combating their belated trauma to reshape their lives. The opening lines of both the novels i.e. *The Half Mother* and *Beloved* proclaim the blatant place of trauma in the lives of the protagonists. Though their traumas are not alike because Haleema's trauma stems out of India's military oppression, whereas Sethe's trauma is caused by White supremacists. Both female protagonists have endured atrocious events and suffer predictable psychological harm. Although the authors have quoted incidents of repeated and prolonged abuse the effects of a single traumatic event of losing a child are overwhelming for both Sethe and Haleema. The understanding of trauma is compiled of two opposing components; first, the traumatic incident and the second is the remembrance of the event which takes the form of an eternal wound.

A traumatic memory can be described by the conspicuous enigma that while its re-enactments are distressingly literal and detailed, it nonetheless is chiefly unavailable to conscious remembrance and control. The traumatic events return to the consciousness of the victim in form of flashbacks and nightmares. According to Caruth, "The pathology consists...solely in the structure of its experience or

reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precise to be possessed by an image or event” (1995, p. 4-5). The same happens to the protagonists of the novels as both Haleema and Sethe are haunted by the memories of their past. The first chapter of Bashir’s novel is titled: *A reverie in retrospect*. The title indicates the place of memory in the life of the protagonist. Introducing Haleema, the author declares, “bit and pieces of memories randomly refracted through her reverie” (Bashir, 2014, p. 3). Narrating the incident of Imran’s abduction, Bashir writes: “After Imran had been taken away, she had fallen to the ground and helplessly looked up at the sky. Her hair had fallen loose about her face, as if it had been pulled in a fight. She had continued staring at the inky sky, searching for God and howling with helplessness..... Haleema hated the moon since then—it was a reminder of her loss, nothing else” (Bashir, 2014, p. 3). The repetition of the word ‘helplessness’ emphasizes the trauma of the mother. Through Haleema’s story, Bashir is not only relating the story of a single mother but he also refers to a similar incident in his novel that alludes to the actual history of the troubled land of Kashmir.

Kashmir’s traumatic history has its roots in the historical truths of the valley. In 1846, in the Treaty of Amritsar, the colonial government sold the beautiful valley to the Hindu Dogra monarch, Gulab Singh. Hence a Hindu was the ruler of a Muslim majority area now. However, one century later in 1947 when Subcontinent was divided into two countries i.e. India (Hindu majority) and Pakistan (Muslim majority), Gulab Singh’s great-grandson Maharaja Hari Singh was unable to decide whether to join India or Pakistan. Although, after some reluctance, he decided to join the state of India, however, this decision of the Maharaja was contested by Pakistan. Pakistan argued that Kashmir cannot be part of India because the valley was predominantly Muslim majority area so in

principle it should be part of Muslim land. The conflict resulted in the first war between the rival countries of India and Pakistan, which was later on halted in 1949 by the interference of the United Nations. Ever since the inception of the two countries, the issue of Kashmir is a source of the rift between the two rivals. Commenting on the unending conflict, Victoria Schofield writes, “For fifty years, India and Pakistan have fought over Jammu and Kashmir both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table; both countries wanted to absorb it within their borders, neither of them has succeeded in doing so entirely. One-third of the former princely state is administered by Pakistan, known as ‘Azad’ (Free) Jammu and Kashmir and the Northern Areas; two-thirds, known as the state of Jammu and Kashmir, are controlled by India” (2003, 6). Pakistan and India have fought many on-field and proxy wars over the Kashmir issue, including the 1965 and 1971 wars. In the 1971 war, Pakistan even lost one part of the country as East Pakistan seceded and declared herself as an independent country named Bangladesh. According to Simla agreement, the border between the two countries was renamed as the line of control (LOC). The United Nations resolutions recommend that “India and Pakistan should proceed with holding a plebiscite, as already agreed by the Governments of India and Pakistan so that the people themselves could decide their future” (Schofield, 2003, p. xii). However, this solution to the conflict never became a reality and in 1989 the Kashmiri Muslim started struggling against the Indian occupation of their land. “The Kashmir conflict remains both a struggle for land as well as about the rights of people to determine their future. To date, no consensus has been reached between India and Pakistan, nor with the people, on the future of the state”². The struggle is both military and political as some groups of Kashmiris are unarmed. As a response, the Indian government has

² Schofield, Victoria. (2003). *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War*. London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd.P. xv.

deputed the huge number of military men in Kashmir who are curbing the voice of the indigenous people in order to suppress the Kashmiris' fight for self-determination, Indian Army frequently raids the houses of innocent civilians and abducts and tortures the blameless people. Schofield notes; "As the insurgency in the valley gained momentum, the acts of sabotage increased in frequency and intensity. The police and security forces reacted violently, often at the expense of innocent civilians who were caught in the crossfire"³ (2003, p. 143). Shahnaz Bashir has documented the same tragic history of Kashmiris in the novel *The Half Mother*.

Bashir documents the diverse ways in which Kashmiris responded to the altering dynamics of their land in the milieu of the Freedom Movement, not forgetting the suppressive role of the Indian Army. Bashir writes, "then Shabeer Ahmad, the blacksmith's son, was the first in Natipora to fall to army bullets. Twenty-three rounds were pumped into his chest when he refused to throw a Pakistani flag off a telegraph pole" (2014, p. 32). So, it is not just trauma of a single Kashmiri mother but actually the historical trauma of a whole community that has struggled against its oppressors for decades. The tragic events of losing a child are not fully integrated at the time that they took place yet remained unaltered and reverted, in their precision, at a later time. Caruth notes that the capability to recuperate the past is thus closely connected to 'the inability to have access to it' (1995, p. 152).

Similarly, Toni Morrison's protagonist, Sethe's conscious mind tries to forget the actual event yet her subconscious reminds her the same memory. Talking about her hallucinations to her daughter Denver, she says: "Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place- the picture of it- stays, and not just in

³ Ibid.,143

my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened" (Morrison, 2014, p. 43). Sethe's traumatic memory revokes under particular conditions, where the situation is reminiscent of the actual event.

Morrison documents the history of her community through her fictional work because the African American history in the United States of America is full of tragic narratives. Describing the historical time period of Civil War, Eric Foner writes, "Two centuries had passed since the first twenty Africans were landed in Virginia from the Dutch ship. After abolition in the North, slavery had become the "peculiar institution" of the South—that is, an institution unique to southern society" (2005, p. 389). Although the African American presence in the United States has been significant historically but it was only after the American Civil War (1861-1865) that they started gaining importance in the common discourse both social and political. The American Civil War is considered the bloodiest war in the history of the country because sixty-two hundred thousand lives were lost on this catastrophic occasion. The war was fought between the American South and North over the issue of slavery. Different historians look at the incident differently as for some it was an ethical issue, whereas for others it was a purely economic debate. Foner notes: "Slavery shaped the lives of all Americans, white or black. It helped to determine where they lived, how they worked, and under what conditions they could exercise their freedom of speech, assembly, and the press" (2005, p. 391). The pro-slavery South wanted to save the institution of slavery because their economy was based on it, on the other hand, the industrial North demanded more labour for industry hence the free slaves were potential workers for them. The strange fact is that although the war was fought for African Americans' freedom, however for the first two years of the war neither the enslaved nor

the free African Americans were allowed to enlist for the war. Although, African Americans managed to get freedom ultimately (at least theoretically) however, their horrendous narratives of slavery still resonate with African American literature. Both sides of slavery and freedom are full of traumatic stories of African Americans. Commenting on the lives of slaves, Eric Foner notes, “For slaves, the “peculiar institution” meant a life of incessant toil, brutal punishment, and the constant fear that their families would be destroyed by sale” (2005, p. 400). The lives of the slave women were even more miserable because they were doubly tortured and humiliated, first for being a slave and `secondly for being a female. Foner quotes a court case to demonstrate the condition of slave women, “a Missouri court considered the “crime” of Celia, a slave who had killed her master while resisting a sexual assault. State law deemed “any woman” in such circumstances to be acting in self-defense. But Celia, the court ruled, was not a “woman” in the eyes of the Law. She was a slave, whose master had complete power over her person. The court sentenced her to death. However, since Celia was pregnant, her execution was postponed until the child had been born, so as not to deprive her owners’ their right of property” (2011, p. 401). The history of African American slaves is full of similar incidents, not only historians but also literary artists have documented these brutalities in their fictional works.

Toni Morrison, one of the most celebrated African American novelists document the horrors of slavery in her novel *Beloved*. Morrison’s story is presumably based on the true story of Margaret Garner, who killed her baby daughter and attempted to kill the other children to prevent them from going back to slavery. The narrative has many similarities with actual events yet has many fictitious parts as well. By documenting Sethe’s tragic story, Morrison actually recorded that disremembered past of the African Americans, especially slave mothers. The tone of the text is tragic right from the beginning as Morrison announces, “124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of

baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (Morison, 2010, p. 3). In telling the story of an actual slave woman, Morison has revealed the personal truth of a slave mother as well as the collective history of many African American slave mothers who were living under similar conditions and met a similar fate. The act of a mother killing her own child explains the devastating state of mind of a mother who has suffered the horrors of slavery. Through her work of art Morrison has empowered the sensibility of African American ethos. Her narration of Sethe's story leads her into the history of African American slave experience.

Through the story of the haunting memories of a mother, Morrison explains the history of racism to her reader. The text does not only highlight the trauma of a mother but also explains the pains related to a female's identity (especially being an African American). As a historical novel, *Beloved* fills in the gap left by the recorded historical records. It also explains the psychological condition of a slave mother, who decides to kill her children rather than allowing them to spend a life of a slave. Toni Morrison explains the African American collective trauma through her characters and situations. The text depicts the slave society of Ohio where the African Americans are tortured and inhumanly treated by the plantation owners. To resist slavery and free herself and her children of racist slaveholders Sethe kills her daughter. Explaining Sethe's feelings, Morrison writes, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison, 2012, p. 164). It's not only the story of the killed daughter that narrates the communal history but even Sethe's own body is symbolically an embodiment of the traumatic past of her race.

Morrison's novel is set in the 1870s Ohio, whereas, Bashir's narrative is set in the 1990s Indian Occupied Kashmir. During this time period, African Americans were suffering from social, cultural and political discrimination because of slavery, while the Kashmiri's of the 1990s were the victims of illegal occupation and domination

of the Indian military. Both novels chronicle the agony and grief of African American and Kashmiri women. The individual accounts of the protagonists i.e. Sethe and Haleema, during the aforementioned time periods actually transcribe the communal history. Both Morrison and Bashir use fiction as a means to record the troubled pasts of their communities. These fictional accounts of trauma make up for the erasures of the individual traumas in the formal historical records. According to Cathy Caruth, traumatic experiences are at times “available as flashbacks or simple memories.” Caruth defines trauma as “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). Both Morrison and Bashir empower their protagonists by converting their ‘traumatic memory into narrative memory’ (Whitehead, 1995, p. 150).

Conclusion

This study sought to introduce and explore the concept of trauma fiction. It has further analyzed the novels *The Half Mother* and *Beloved* as narratives concerned with traumatic events. Toni Morrison’s novel emerged out of African Americans’ collective experience of slavery, whereas Shahnaz Bashir’s novel responds to a mother’s individual experience of losing a child which generally represents the experience of many Kashmiri mothers who lost their sons during the unending war of freedom. Through their fictional works both Morrison and Bashir explore stances that can be seen as impeding the quest for justice and peace. Both the authors adopt trauma narratives as a technique to reconstruct the past in order to elucidate its effect on the present. This study also analyzes the possibility of healing for the characters in the novel and contends that the protagonists do not achieve healing in the text as trauma cannot be fully overcome. There are several reasons for this, one being the constant encounter of the Kashmiris and African

Americans with the source of trauma. Both communities are still marginalized and disenfranchised in mainstream society which causes individual as well as communal trauma. These selected novels are assertions of trauma by the authors belonging to the discriminated communities.

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