

BETWEEN WOUND AND THE VOICE: LOCATING THE SELF IN RUMOURS OF SPRING: A GIRLHOOD IN KASHMIR

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Abstract

Trauma and its expression are as old as human civilization is, the ways of purgation of traumatic feelings however may vary across time and space. The move of eclipsing and universalising the trauma is an uncontested claim of Euro-American exclusivity. Nevertheless, the global south like Global North has undergone and is undergoing similar bouts of traumatic uprisings in numerous ways. Like many conflict zones over the globe in general and Asia in particular Kashmir remains the centre or rather the epicentre of tragedies and turbulence from past many decades now. The narratives of trauma, exile and nostalgic dilemma one after the other captivate readers and researchers of the field of trauma studies innumerable. Besides the lush green topography and magical sight-seeing, Kashmir is considered to be a spot of interstate rivalry and a deadly war zone. Militarization of the land and terrorizing its people, persecution and exodus of millions is a tragic testimony that not just water, sometimes blood glides through rivers of Kashmir. The themes of literature from Kashmir have shifted and are shifting from maxims and sufi poetry or 'vakhs' to narrativizing pain, traumatic memory writing, nostalgic dilemmas and tragic loss. The present study focuses upon the elements of nostalgia of childhood and traumatic memory during rising insurgency in Kashmir, in the book *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* by Farah Bashir.

Key words: Trauma, memory, nostalgia, pain, loss, terror, war zone, Kashmir.

Introduction

Studies on human psyche and its workings as represented in literature are areas of critical interest in contemporary academics. It is generally understood that literature prepares a space to navigate into that inner core of human life and explore its ramifications on life and the world outside. The discursive act of writing and reading of trauma literature occupies a significant position in such a space. Theoretical debates on contemporary literature based on trauma related studies engender questions regarding the possibility of a narrative in the present, representing the traumatic events in the past or even placed in the future, and the validity of such narratives in recounting or retelling the subjectivities of the victims in the fictional or nonfictional texts/contexts. Contemporary writings, especially literature in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the present century have been distinct with the ambience of horror and horrendous wounds.

Even though the problem of representation in language is generally contested, it is also to be acknowledged that only the language of literature has the potential to traverse the

mindscape of humans marked with memories, retrospection, introspection and reminiscences, which are again poignantly coloured by sufferings, pains, wounds and trauma. Vulnerability and risk in relation to trauma, ethics, politics and poetics constitute the central concerns in contemporary culture, and academic conversations address these issues in the present parlance of literary researches. The precarious position of the traumatic subjectivity of the contemporary human life in this backdrop becomes a point of grave academic concern in the present scenario. Similarly, the valley of Kashmir, has not a single past, however it is the melting pot of Buddhism, dwellings for teachings of Vedanta and a hub of mystic Islam. After the Buddhist and Hindu Rajas Kashmir was ruled by afghans, Mughals, Sikhs and Dogras respectively. The peace-loving people accommodated the cultural and religious diversity without showing much resentment with dominant trend.

The variegated culture of Kashmir is thus unique and is assimilative in its basic rubric, but the contentious socio-political conflict between India and Pakistan, since Partition, has ruined the peace of this beautiful vale and turned it into one of the highest militarised zones of the world. Evidently the history of Kashmir is punctuated by the path breaking events which have changed the face as well as fate of Kashmir and Kashmiris, like formation of the state in 1846, by signing the treaty of Amritsar between Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the British government, and then the subsequent discord between majority of Kashmiri populace and Maharaja on the parochial tendencies which eventually resulted in a revolt against Dogra Monarchs in 1931. Then another major event which defined the future course of Kashmir was the accession of Kashmir to Indian union in 1948, with a room for autonomy, but the complex political issues surrounding this event led to the perceived alienation among the Kashmiri masses. However, it was the insurgency of 1989 which rocked and ruined the peace in the valley to the extreme. The situation of Kashmir took an unimaginably violent turn in 1990s. As Shahnaz Bashir opines:

The year 1990. As the insurgency in the valley intensified, the government resigned, paving the way for governor's rule. Tears, blood, death and war followed, as did curfews, crackdowns, raids, encounters, killings, bunkers, an exodus of people, burning markets, schools and buildings (33).

Different waves of militancy arose during this time, the radical forces which were curbed by Sheikh Abdullah earlier, became quite assertive during this period. Mercenaries like Hizbul Mujahideen, were increasing their hold with the strength of around 20,000 militants in different parts of the state (Behera: 38). The minority Kashmiri Pandit community was targeted by the militants by creating an atmosphere of terror in the valley, and they were eventually forced to leave their homes. The conflict between armed forces and militants took detrimental toll on the lives of common Kashmiris from all walks of life. This period thus marked a complete shift in Kashmir's political, social and literary front. This research project undertakes to focus on the shift in literary scene of Kashmir owing to tumultuous political history of the region and will study the representation of trauma of Kashmiri people, particularly women, who went through these excruciatingly painful phases silently. As be it any conflict zone, women and children are the worst sufferers of the traumatic events and Kashmir is no exception. Kavita Suri who did a survey on Kashmir during this decade

observes; Traveling in rural Kashmir, I had only one main observation – the women of Kashmir are the most affected and silent sufferers of over a decade long turmoil... .. they continue suffering silently behind the veils of ignorance, illiteracy and discrimination (12).

The mass deaths of young men owing to this conflict has severely crumbled the familial structure and general well-being of the natives. Kashmiri women are thus on the receiving end from all the sides. Since they are both the active and passive sufferers. They experience victimhood-as victims of direct violence, of horrific rapes and torture and also of indirect violence which makes them widows or half widows of the disappeared men and mothers of sons killed or orphaned. Owing to repetitive horrific incidences, they have been victims of uncontrolled hallucinations, and have witnessed the sights of dying loved ones which often resulted into their beginning to reshape the thinking about physical and mental experiences. They are hence at the centre of this trauma, and the continuous traumatic stress syndrome.

Trauma has become a catchword and central category in present times. Literature is the saga of humanity, and it is an inseparable tie between pain and pleasure, and the word trauma is inseparable from literature. Literature is all about the attempts to present the inexpressible, the way out to the possible expression and it's a transition from being to becoming. Literature prepares us to navigate through the inner core of human lives and explore its ramifications. The root of the Greek term trauma was something that caused physical suffering. Eventually, although initially alluding to physical harm. In later usage, particularly in medical and psychiatric sciences, literature, and Freud's writings, the term trauma refers to a mental injury. Freud proposed that it is unavailable to awareness until it re-imposes itself repeatedly in nightmares and the survivors' repetitive actions (Caruth, 6). Freud's idea of developmental psychology evolved from his method of psychoanalytic analysis of adult emotional illnesses and his readings in the preceding medical sexology. Freud recognised that adult neurotic illnesses, particularly hysteria, were caused by psychic shock, which he viewed as a three-part process: a traumatic incident, the victim experiencing this trauma, and the victim's psychological defence against this trauma, either by forgetting or repression (Freud, 17).

Trauma is defined as any overwhelming incident that is accepted by the conscious mind. It is possible to forget, but it returns as repeating behaviour. Traumatic experiences, according to Freud, continue to linger in the unconscious like "foreign bodies" in the mind that threaten to be released at any moment. Literature has therapeutic value, the ability to heal wounds and psychological dilemmas, and it is narrativized. However, while narrativizing the inexpressibility becomes the key word, that is, how is it possible to express pain or narrativize trauma, the dominant effort of pleasure is centred among pains, and the question of communicating the incommunicable, or rather expressing the inexpressible, or representing the unrepresentable, becomes the central issue. While narrating the incommunicability, we are aware that literature itself becomes a medium of pain, and similarly, language is the only medium through which we can communicate or narrate. Literature attempts to symbolize the non symbolizable wound, both in form and content, in order to carve trauma.

The growth of trauma studies since the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) provides a significant opportunity for reflection for the expanding number of critics concerned with tracing the links between historical forces, psychic experience, and literary representation. On the one hand, the influence of the work in this subject has been warranted. It applies advanced psychoanalytic principles to communal dynamics, providing socially unique and psychologically insightful interpretations of historical violence. These narratives are particularly powerful when they focus on what I refer to as "punctual" traumas: historical events of such singularity, enormity, and horror that they can be interpreted as shocks that disable the psychological system. Thus, for instance, in their readings of the Holocaust — the paradigmatic example for critics concerned with this type of trauma — Caruth and others have helped us see how a historical moment may be experienced less as an ongoing set of processes that shape and are shaped by those living through them and more as a punctual blow to the psyche that overwhelms its functioning, disables its defences, and removes it from direct contact with the brutalising event itself.

Therefore, the memoir *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir*, is a terrifying tender account of a girl growing amidst pain, uncertainty and chaos where every day is a struggle for existence a battle between life and death. Farah Bashir is a budding female writer from Kashmir who like many other Kashmiri writers draws inspiration and writing style from Agha Shahid Ali. The book is packed with traumatic narratives of abduction, disappearances, midnight raids, encounters and above all violence, pain, torture, curfews killings and life on alert. It starts with author's grandmother getting old and deteriorating health, referring to her as Bobeh, who happens to be the literal spine and centre of the universe of book, every chapter follows an add on the violence accounts and traumatic uprisings. The book has many stories centring around trauma and memory of the author. It tells how the whole atmosphere of valley changed and rising insurgency has taken toll on physical and psychological world of a child as well as an adult like Bobeh and she calls it 'stillness of snow without any snow'. The spring which is considered to be the queen of seasons is now just a rumoured phenomenon for Kashmiris, where lives come to a halt in a moment there is weddings and funerals at the same time. Continuous curfews, shutdowns and ensuing protests by people was the only normalcy children would see growing around, regular crackdowns and search operations were nothing new to even an eight or eighteen-year-old as the author notes; In the morning after I had left to take the exam, a few adjoining neighbourhoods between home and school were cordoned off by the troops so that they could conduct search operations, commonly known as 'crackdown'...and after reaching home looking for hearty meals what she finds out instead is throng of people outside her home, which Farah describes like 'I reached home to find a commotion of people outside our koche. My heart sank.

Was someone hit by a bullet?

Who could it be?

Was father...

Was mother hit... (8)

These throat strangling thoughts coming in the mind of a teenager, who just returns from the school is traumatic to the core, the matter however turns out to be slightly different, it was author's grandmother's funeral which attracted crowd of people in the courtyard. recalling the memories of childhood spent with Bobeh, the festivities fervours no more remain what they used to be a few years ago. As a child of twelve she decides not to celebrate Eid again, and ironically associates it with melancholy especially the Eid eves after 1989 turned more strangulating for her, she writes; that Eid eve, I decided unwittingly to never participate in festivities again...I began associating inexplicable melancholy with Eid(10). The anticipation of festivities changing in the mind of a twelve-year-old and with this sinking deeper each passing moment is in fact a testimony reflecting serious psychological and emotional transformations. It happens with author being kid going to salon to get ready for ensuing Eid and getting caught up in cross firing barely escaping bullets and with rumours of her being killed, worsens the situation of ailing Bobeh further along with her parents, and she recalls it; '...since then, a dark, silent cloud of death hovers above me every Eid'(15). Remembering the memories of childhood with mix bag of emotional recollections, with the beauty of her bond with Bobeh and a star kid of the family being loved by one and all around to seeing her loved ones gripped in trauma, insurgency, pain and turmoil is not just a single story but multi stories and personalities rolled up in one individual. The rising insurgency and ensuing curfew not only impact getting to the world outside, but there remains a disruption of psychological world too, besides all the changing atmosphere, food habits see a major change and most noticeably the taste of food too. Author of the book writes it in a most captivating way that her food never tasted the way it would do so in the days when there was no curfew, the lines are;

Since the winter of 1990, mother started adding excess water to curries to make each dish last longer...mother was someone who took pride in her extravagant recipes...entire house would be suffused with the distinct aroma of her cooking. But after 1990, so many aspects of our lives, mother's kitchen too seemed unfamiliar. The way food tasted changed...over the years, the smells of certain foods were associated with different incidents which I didn't want to remember...the dish no longer had the warmth and comfort it had when it was cooked on the days when there was no curfew. (183-84)

As is always the case with pockets of the world embroiled in wars, uncertain livelihood and havoc of lockdowns, bandhs, life doesn't seem the way it would or it should, Kashmir is no exception here. Trauma of witnessing the people dying around, innocent civilians and soldiers alike and taking a vow to kill oneself before being killed by the other person is the extreme step a traumatic life offers someone in mad frustration. Kashmiri society is presented as a territory of oppressed people, where terror has all the joys and life is under constant repression, packed with pain and conflict. The terror accounts of the book are replete with custodial torture, schools and working places being shut down, where psychological and physical personal becomes an inescapable collective. The life of crackdowns has nothing to offer to its people except vanishing past luxuries and serene shadows of chinar trees. In such a noted depiction from 'A Wedding, A Funeral' Farah reflects upon traumatic numbness of a sister wailing dirge on her brother being shot dead;

Why didn't I arrange for a gun, baayo?

...

Shall I put henna on you, potro?

Are you thirsty?

Myani potro, myani potro (my son, my son) (125).

It is reflected that the trauma of a sister and mother can be recognized in Caruthian notion of 'traumatic numbness', 'reenactment and double call'. Curfew and infinite crackdowns effected different people differently, from school going kids to aged ones it drastically turned dreams to complete or in cases partial silences. With schools being opened sporadically, to children struggling to complete their minimum syllabus at homes, life became an intolerable paranoia for people especially during the decade of 1990s. with such an incident writer (back then a kid) describes an incident of being caught in the cross roads during December 1992:

After a gun battle in Lal Chowk, troops had set ablaze an entire patch of shops. My maternal aunt's husband and some more relatives owned a few of them...it seemed like time of exams has become jinxed... (115)

It is said, Kashmir, and its turmoil ridden territory haunts people like Algeria does to France, the pain ridden voices are registering their impactful presence in the international, national and its regional intellectual arena. It all becomes a serious concern when the most passionate stakeholders of a society or family become silent. Bobeh (grandmother of writer) becomes such an individual that from taking an observation of everything going around to take refuge of a window to watch passers-by, seeing rise of Kashmir's glory to the violent times of siege, she in most respects resembles character 'Ma' of Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* (2011), as in this novel too Waheed discusses agony torture, crunches, atrocities and choking conditions of dazzling valley; 'they massacre hundreds of our brothers in broad daylight.....they burn down entire localities' (33) . In much similar way, Farah Bashir too makes it clear in the very title itself that the spring is just rumoured, it is far away from coming, everything is engulfed in the terror stricken gloomy atmosphere and the only thing which has changed over the years is intensity of pain, trauma and ways of torture, she explains; That day, I felt as if I had no legs, as if they had been blown off.....my heart sank... (Bashir, 95)

The scholarly studies show that traumatic responses of any war zone, and particularly Kashmiris is brimmed with sustained political turmoil. The signs of stress keep modifying just to shape up the new realities. Life in such a territory is born out of each passing day anxiety, spurts of fear and fever that not only reflects the turbulent past, but a traumatic present and probably an entirely unyielding, uncertain future. talking of a mother daughter duo, caught in the grip of cross firing Farah notices:

...More faces resembling Jaaji's started appearing in the streets, and number of patients outside the psychiatrist clinics increased rapidly...in the year 1993, just before I turned

seventeen, I showed up symptoms of heightened anxiety. I often contemplated various means by which to commit suicide... (74)

Anxiety, regular strokes of violence and consequent traumatic responses become the new way of looking at the world around. The experiences of trauma in such a set of circumstances vary individually, it is a personal as well as a collective trauma. This trauma bases itself on the perception of what few of the individuals felt or might have felt, as it seeps through generations giving new modes and means of its expression. Trauma is a mental distressing state that damages consciousness and haunts in nightmares 'repeated nightmares' as Farah points out; But the carefree circumstances of the time before 1989 had turned into ghosts. After 1989, it didn't feel like we lived in the same house, especially at night... (66)

Kashmir post 1989-90 has become a land of loss, turbulence and struggle for reclaiming identities. As the insurgent forces gain momentum life of Kashmiris experiences a record shift in daily routines. The resultant atrocities upon collective demand for freedom attracts antagonism from military. Ironically the trauma of exodus and as well as anxiety of those left behind becomes a never-ending communal identity marker for natives of Kashmir. A broken music system would be a loss to me than to anyone else. Father had more or less stopped listening to music since 1990. He was always on alert for anything amiss... (49)

Trauma has impacted lives of Kashmiris not in one aspect, but in and around all the major domains, the typical music which was part of Kashmiri cultural identity records a declining shift. Those courtyards don't see any 'shehnai walas' now. There is just a sound of bombs, encounters, sobs and sighs of human beings. As it was, after the winter of 1990, when we could no longer see the light in Laxmisree's room across the alley, Bobeh would heave long sighs, which in turn aggravated her wheezing. She often stared at the window of Laxmisree's room... (78) Trauma in Kashmir is classic anecdote of double wound, the trauma of those who left marks one edge and those who witnessed their loved ones on the other. One midnight of cold winter shattered years of peace, brotherhood and camaraderie into permanent communal overtones. This trauma is 'inexpressible' as the thoughts of remembrance bring with them traumatic repetitions, Farah Bashir notably reflects; Fear used to be of a different kind before 1990. In the beginning of 1990s, I wasn't sure of what was happening in the neighbourhood...most often, none of us could muster the courage to peep out of the windows and see what the sounds were about... (82). The only mode to bring the broken narrative into coherent one is to recall moments went by, the very linearity of time gets destroyed into an all-pervasive memory. While recounting the horrific incidents Bashir says she doesn't want to remember few of the incidents, she pauses on what transpired her fully, reflects how harsh and painful it is to remember the memories which are too heart wrenching. One such instance is when she felt the absence of her school friend, while the only possible means to unload her burden is to narrativize the pain, it is these incidents and experiences which shape an individual's identity into a permanent 'victim' or 'perpetrator'.

All the excitement came to an end in the summer of 1990 when we went back to school...Renuka was neither in the classroom, nor in the bus...I knew that I would not be seeing her again... (94). The year of 1990 left an undeniable mark on Kashmiri identity, shaping it into new discourses, effecting women the most. Farah's grandmother is no more

the brave lay she used to be; she has many pains to endure now. The intensity of her sufferings is simply multiplied now, seeing out of the window and not getting sight of her beloved neighbours is a 'double wound' and what Caruth calls 'unsayable' rather 'inexpressible' expression. They seemed a part of many places that were forbidden to us. The sting was no longer restricted to spring, but from 1990 onwards, it transcended seasons. The sting was of a different kind... (101)

The feeling of immense helplessness hovers all around the lives, the inhabitants of Farah's surroundings are forced to confront the unimaginable harrowing incidents. The quietness becomes new rule of life, as it is shown there are no more conversations about Ksshmir's heydays but sounds of wailing mothers, sisters, gunshots and abduction, cross firings etc. It feels utterly disgusting the way people lived, suffered and doubly wounded and oppressed. Our lives were controlled from elsewhere and the dreams that we dreamt were always at the mercy of someone else, someone occupying us, ruling us... (116)

Conclusion

The detailed examination reflects that, Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir is a poignant account of lives of Kashmiris particularly during the decade of 1990s, the turbulent uprisings how it unfolded and consequent engulf of normalcy of each and every aspect of life differently. The all-pervasive fear, anxiety and trauma takes the centre stage in the world of the book. The stories within story circles around female characters, Bobeh (Bashir's grandmother) being the epicentre. The memoir is told from the view point of a teenage girl (author herself) growing amidst constant siege of curfew, witnessing weddings and funerals alike to giving a possible vent out to catharsis is nothing less than a kunstlerroman. The multiple models of trauma and memory presented in the trauma memoir draw attention to the significance of setting, which serves as a metaphorical and material representation of trauma's effects. In significant ways, the modern trauma literature examines the effects of suffering on the individual and community through the character's relationship to place. A traumatic experience disrupts attachments between the self and others by calling into question fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships, which are in turn tied to particular environments. A traumatic piece of writings isn't reductionist rather itself becomes the theory as to how the characters and protagonists view themselves in a claustrophobic tight corner.

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