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## Traumatic History, Traumatic Memory: Fiction and its Therapeutic Value in Shonali Bose's *Amu*

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The fictionalized representation of trauma has prompted an increasingly wide range of scholarship. This paper shall explore how national history and personal memory complement one another and how literature performs a recuperative function by allowing a verbalization of buried trauma in narrative. Through mourning, literature attempts to come to terms with the excruciating memories of past, question the ethical dimension attached to it and also explores possibilities of healing through the process of reintegration with one's past. In other words, literature acts as a 'witness' to these "memory places" (115), as Geoffrey Hartman calls in *The Longest Shadow* (1996). In order to explore how literature acts as a medium to overcome stress and trauma, the novel this paper shall focus is Shonali Bose's *Amu* (2004). It shall highlight the impact of traumatic history of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in India on the victims, their families and the other witnesses and make an effort to arrive at a process of collective healing through its representation in literature.

In exploring the history of African slavery, Jewish Holocaust, and Vietnam War we find an abundance of literary representation of trauma pertaining to these historical events. The political mayhem in South Asian nations' past however, remains a relatively less researched area. In recent times a sustained interest is noted in South Asian fiction to explore the interrelation between history, memory, traumatic past and its representation in literature. This essay intends to trace the recent preoccupation with fictionalized representation of trauma focusing specifically on the 1984 Delhi riots in India. Significantly it is noticed that after any political disturbance on the national front what is remembered is the achievements and tales of victory and bravery. Things that remain unacknowledged is the collective trauma of the people who had to lose their families. Jenny Edkins in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (2003) argue that in contemporary times:

Victory parades, remembrance ceremonies, and war museums tell of glory, courage and sacrifice. The nation is renewed, the state strengthened. *Private grief is overlaid by national mourning and blunted – or eased – by stories of service and duty. The authorities that had the power to conscript citizens, and send them to their deaths now write their obituaries.* (1, emphasis added)

*Amu* depicts how trauma is transmitted through generations and reflects how traumatic memory and its impact get intensified with the passage of time.

On examining the history of the 1984 Delhi riots, we find that in November '84, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh body guards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh. On the other hand the assassination was the result of the counter attacks that the Indian Army made into the premises of the Golden temple in June in accordance with Indira Gandhi's orders. This further led to the mass massacre of the Sikhs all over the country.

Parvinder Singh in *Kristallnacht* (2009) pointed out that though the attack was projected as an attempt to capture the terrorists hiding inside the premises of the Golden Temple, yet it was actually carried out to curb the rising Sikh demand for a separate state of Khalistan (4). Jaskaran Kaur on the other hand in *Twenty years of Impunity* (2006) explained how the label “riot” not only “mischaracterizes the massacres, but purposefully masks brutal dimensions” (102). The novel successfully represents the impact that the mass carnage left on the survivors and witnesses who were not only physically assaulted but also psychologically marred as a result of experiencing such brutal “state-engineered” carnage, as termed by Rene Kaes (Foreword ix).

Shonali Bose, the novelist, was studying at Delhi University and witnessed the violence carried out against the Sikhs during the riots. Her ordeal in witnessing the Sikh massacre continued to traumatize her even after she had migrated to United States and compelled her to write about this history in fiction. According to Esther Rashkin in *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture* (2008) when one develops the potential to “verbalize a secret”, it signifies that the subject has surmounted “an obstacle to being” and can now “reengage in the (still challenging) process of going-on-being” (20). Rashkin also believes that such verbalization also “prevents a silenced drama from being transmitted transgenerationally to subjects who have no direct experience of it” (20). The temporal and spatial distancing that Bose attained with her life in United States allowed her with a perspective to look back upon this history and verbalize the unheard trauma of the victims and survivors. Literature performs a recuperative medium where in narrating the stress and trauma the survivors attend to the ‘wounds’ that were left open yet buried. Fiona Darroch in *Memory and Myth* (2009) argues that “the act of writing is often considered therapeutic, a way of working through painful memories and forgotten pasts” and that the “re-staging of the past” within novels can therefore be understood as a “form of healing” for the writer as well as the community (73).

Amitav Ghosh, the renowned novelist, who was an academician in Delhi University during the riots recollected witnessing the bloody massacre, in an online article, “The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi” (2002). Ghosh described how he was psychologically traumatized seeing the carnage. He commented that the usual response to violence is one of “repugnance”, and that a significant number of people tried to oppose it in whatever ways they could to address the mass carnage that followed the assassination. Here Van der Kolk and McFarlane’s argument in “Trauma and Its Challenge to Society” (1996) explains the situation of the witnesses, who were not directly assaulted yet “ashamed and disgusted” by their “failure to prevent” what has happened to others. In case of these people “a breach in their expectations of themselves and of their culture becomes part of the traumatic experience” (27). This condition is dealt explicitly through Amu’s trauma, the protagonist around whom the novel is woven. Her feeling of helplessness in being unable to prevent her younger brother from the attackers led to a feeling of guilt in her. Antze and Lambek in *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (1996) argue that when memories recall acts of violence against “individuals or entire groups”, they carry “additional burdens - as indictments or confessions, or as emblems of a victimized identity”. Here, acts of remembering often take on “performative meaning within a charged field of contested moral and political claims” (Preface vii).

The novelist’s presentation of Keya in the novel reflects some of the significant traumatic experience that Shonali Bose encountered during her visits to the relief camps. Keya like the novelist Bose, adopted a girl from the camp whose mother committed suicide being unable to bear the pain of witnessing her son being murdered in front of her. Keya too migrated to United States, hoping to lead a life free from the painful memories. She ensured that Kaju, also called

Amu in the novel, was never reminded of the riots. But traumatic memory refuses to be buried and tragic events are not wiped off so easily. Even in United States, Kaju seemed restless being haunted by her past. Unable to push these memories to backstage, Kaju decided to return to her roots in order to find the cause of the sudden flashbacks and nightmares she suffered from. In “Psychobiology of Trauma Response” (1987) Bessel A. van der Kolk and Mark S. Greenberg state that “[i]n many traumatized individuals, the trauma is reexperienced in the form of nightmares and flashbacks, which are often an exact reliving of actual traumatic experience” (69).

In India Kaju underwent the constant urge to know her roots and she was informed by Keya’s relations that Chandan Hola was the place where her family had lived and that an epidemic had wiped out the entire village. However, contrary to her expectations, Kaju’s visit to the village left her stranded. She could not connect to the place and was left wondering why she could not feel a sense of oneness with it. She went to the Delhi University campus to meet Keya’s old friend, Lalitha to gather some additional information about her real parents, being unconvinced with the details she was given. It was during one such visit to the campus that she befriended Kabir and it is through her interactions with him that Kaju seems to unearth her real identity. Her visit to the slums of Trilokpuri to meet Gobind’s family, who worked in the college canteen left her with a sense of “dèjà vu” (42). Although Kaju spent her childhood in United States, yet the impact of the traumatic memory is so intense that she could not evade its power. Caruth explored the characteristic of trauma in terms of passage of time in “Traumatic Awakenings” (1997) suggesting that “[t]raumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness” (208). However, Kaju’s memory of the riots performed an “active role”, as pointed out by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek in *Tense Past* (1996). According to Antze and Lambek, “[m]emory becomes a ‘site’, a monument visited, rather than a context, a landscape inhabited. The ruins of memory are subject to restoration, and we all become the alienated tourists of our pasts” (Preface xiii).

In one such similar visit to Kabir’s house, Kaju came to know about the 1984 riots. One present among them said, “That’s a long buried history. *It makes a lot of people uncomfortable. We’ve learnt to move on*” (74, emphasis added). On the other hand members like Vivek and his mother Veena spoke about the bloody massacre carried out inside the premises of the Golden Temple. Kaju’s interest in this history was to find out whether it had any connection with the epidemic that wiped out the entire village along with her family. However, when she found her biological mother’s death certificate in Keya’s abandoned trunk, she was assured that her past was intrinsically related to the riots. With the help of Govind chacha and Durga Mausi, the eldest of all women surviving the riots, Kaju gets informed about the attack against the Sikhs on the 31<sup>st</sup> October night. The old woman recounted how she witnessed the unprecedented violence unleashed on the Sikhs in the trains. As Kaju heard the story, she felt “a sick sense of recognition”. “The train sounds, all those dèjà vu flashes, the nightmares – it all seemed to make sense” (94) to her. Lindemann and Horowitz quoted in “The Psychological Consequences of Overwhelming Life Experience” (1987) explain psychological trauma as a “phasic reliving and denial with an alternating intrusive and numbing response such as “hyperreactivity, explosive aggressive outbursts, startle responses, intrusion recollections in the form of nightmares and flashbacks and reenactment of situations reminiscent of the trauma” (3). Kolk in the above chapter concluded that often there is a tendency noticed among the victims of trauma to reenact

the traumatic episode voluntarily. In a similar manner listening to Durga Mausi's story, Kaju imagined herself "sitting on the side berth next to her [Mausi], watching it all take place" (94).

The abject state of the women survivors especially the widows is brought out through Kaju and Kabir's visit to Tilak Vihar Widow Colony. These women had to either witness their husbands and sons being torn apart in front of them or had to endure the physical assault directly. The witnessing of the violence inflicted on their loved ones and their helplessness during the event turned their lives miserable. Moreover most of the widows complained that despite changes in the government, no one was interested in rendering justice to them. Kaju and Kabir were shaken by hearing the gruesome stories that the widows narrated. Kaju's dilemma is expressed in the lines, "I don't want to know and yet I don't know how to stop myself" (102) from knowing the identity of her real mother. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1997) defines this as the central dialectics of psychological trauma:

The conflict between the *will to deny* horrible events and the *will to proclaim* them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of *truth-telling* and *secrecy*. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often *secrecy prevails*, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom. (1, emphasis added)

Literature attends to this dilemma of truth telling and secrecy by acting as an active witness to these 'unspoken' and 'unheard' excruciating histories. One of the widows present there lamented how she had dressed her son like a girl in order to make him look like a girl. But the mob identified him and poured kerosene and burned him alive in front of her. The trauma faced by the widow echoes the trauma that haunted Amu. Jarnail Singh in *I Accuse* (2009) commented:

The terrible events of 1984 cast their long shadow, blighting even the lives of young people, who grew up in an atmosphere of the despair and bitterness of their families who had lost everything. Many of the widows feel the people responsible for their husbands' death are also to blame for all that has befallen since then. (120)

The widows in *Amu* blamed the entire "system" saying that "it wasn't a matter of one politician versus another . . . How was it that almost twenty years later, in spite of countless commissions, different political parties coming to power, promises being made, not a single person had been punished? (105). According to them possibly it was not because of lack of will but because the system was "inefficient" and "corrupt" (105).

Through the episode of the Widows Colony, the readers perceive the pain and trauma of the widows who continued living in the memory of their lost ones. After visiting the widows both Kaju and Kabir were absorbed in their own train of thoughts. Kaju understood why Keya had reacted so sharply to her perception of the '84 violence, as "Hindu-Sikh riots" (105). As explained by Keya it was not a communal riot as projected but "the carnage had been organized" and that "far from providing protection to its people, the State had in fact turned on them" (105) in order to teach the Sikhs a lesson. In the "Introduction" to *Bearing Witness* (2010), Rene Kaes comment that:

If the State abuses the power that it has been given by law, it abuses its legitimacy by using the justice system, the police and military force to infringe human rights and to inflict torture. Thus the state plays with the

very base of human culture and employs the most degrading forms of social and psychological infringement, which threaten to destroy human social organization. (Foreword xxvii)

I believe such a form of violence perpetrated by the State which is supposed to protect its citizens led to the extreme forms of trauma that the survivors had to undergo.

Similar to Kaju, Kabir was experiencing his own angst after he returned from Tilak Vihar Widow's Colony. He understood that the Delhi administration had participated in organizing the riots and must have been "passive, capable of stopping the violence but not moving a finger" (105). As Kabir's father Arun was an IAS officer in Delhi at that time, he wondered "What had his father done? Why hadn't he said he was in Delhi in 1984? The questions haunted him" (105). Kabir thought that probably his father's silence over the years regarding the riots was a sign of his passivity. Not only Kabir, but his mother Meera was also disturbed by Arun's indifference towards the riot victims. She remembered the days when she pleaded him to go out and investigate, to do something when she saw the Sikhs suffer. But he defended himself saying he was too junior within the service to take a stand and that there were "orders from above" (69). As years passed Meera expected he would gradually overcome his passivity but she saw, "he trod the safe line every single time, fulfilling the stagnant orders of the bureaucracy, always maintaining the status quo" (70). Arun's attitude of indifference towards the victims gradually led to a split not only in the relation between him and Meera, but also between him and Kabir. Neither the army nor the police offered any help.

Nonetheless, the Hindu neighbours took an active role in protecting their Sikh brothers. Chachaji recounted how he tried to hide Balbir Singh [the owner of the dhaba in which Gobind worked] in his own house from the rioters. But the mob came and dragged Balbir out and burned him alive. Gobind considered himself responsible for Balbir Singh's death, because it was he who had informed the mob about Balbir's hideout, as he was threatened to death by KK, the local *gunda* [rowdie]. Gobind mourned, "He [KK] didn't kill Balbir, Chachaji. It was me" (97, italics in original). Khushwant Singh, the eminent novelist lamented how the Sikhs during the riots were seen as outsiders in their own country, in the online article "Oh, that Hindu Riot of Passage" (2004). He observed that "even twenty years later, the killers of 10,000 Sikhs remain unpunished". He continued in the same article how he "felt like a Jew . . . in [his] own homeland because [he] was a Sikh".

When Kaju came to know that KK, the main murderer, had a daughter she felt nervous and was filled with revulsion imagining him as her father. Finally when Keya found that it was impossible to evade the question regarding Kaju's real parents, she disclosed to Kaju how her family was one among the victims during the riots. Keya recounted that on November 1, 1984 the mob attacked Trilokenagar shouting slogans, '*Khoon ka badla khoon se lenge!*' [blood shall pay for blood] (122, italics in original text). Gurbachan, Kaju's father was burned alive in front of her. Though Amu struggled to save him, yet she was pushed off. She saw that her father was lying on the ground, with his turban off and was surrounded by men, who poured kerosene and burned him. Amu, terrified by the fire and the sounds of her father's screams fled from the scene. She not only failed to rescue her father from the mob but also her attempt to save Arjun, her brother turned futile. Shanno, Amu's mother who ran for police help was also waved off. In a moment, Shanno and Amu were rendered without family. The deathly silence between Amu and Shanno was torn apart at intervals by "distant wails" (125). The above episode reflects how the innocent Sikhs were brutally slaughtered and how those like Amu and Shanno, who had to witness these atrocities being perpetrated, had to live with the burden of guilt and shame at being

incapable of saving their beloved ones. However, trauma defies linear narration and representation. The unrepresentability of trauma is pointed out by many critics. In *Witness and Memory* (2003) Anna Douglass and Thomas Vogler point out that:

[T]he traumatic event [. . .] is that which cannot be anticipated or reproduced. It thus allows a return to the real without the discredited notions of transparent referentiality often found in traditional modes of historical discourse. This combination of the simultaneous undeniable of reality of the traumatic event with its unapproachability offers the possibility for seeming reconciliation between the undecidable text and the ontological status of the traumatic event as an absolute signified. (5)

The act of witnessing the death of her son and husband rendered Shanno totally hopeless and she led an unresponsive life, alive only in the world of her memories. Van der Kolk in “The Psychological Consequences of Overwhelming Life Experience” (1987) argued that people in whom the effects of trauma have become ingrained often develop a chronic “sense of helplessness and victimization”. The experience may be so unexpected and overwhelming that often the foundations of a person’s coping mechanisms are challenged. If the stress persists, they may lose the feeling that they can actively influence their destinies” (8). Shanno was compelled to relive the traumatic experience on a daily basis when she was questioned repeatedly about the incident in police station. Instead, of trying to render justice if Shanno could have spoken out her buried guilt and shame to someone she would have felt relief. Hence, the narrativization of trauma, as argued in *Writing Wounds: Inscription of Trauma in post-1968 French Women’s Life-Writing* (2004) is “curative” because it not only conveys “what happened” but also “modifies it”, and because it represents the past in a “less disturbing fashion” (Robson 21).

Often in her sleep Kaju woke up panicking being troubled by nightmares and flashbacks being haunted by memories. In “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma” (1991) Van der Kolk and Van der Hart explain the process by which traumatic memory comes back into consciousness. They suggest that traumatic memory is evoked under particular conditions. It occurs “automatically in situations which are reminiscent of the original traumatic situation”. These circumstances trigger traumatic memory. According to them when one element of traumatic experience is evoked, all other elements follow automatically (163). Listening to Keya, Kaju found herself making sense of stray memories, strange terrors that had beset her at different points in her life. She was troubled by other things like “visual flashes in dreams and in her waking consciousness” and that she had suddenly found an explanation to them (126). But Shanno’s trauma was beyond any reparation. Along with Keya, she had even sought police help but soon noticed their unwillingness. Furthermore, the false show of sympathy of the ministers in the relief camp agitated her. Finally when she failed to go to the gurdwara [Sikh temple] on Arjun’s birthday to pray, she felt hopeless and committed suicide. Keya was similarly troubled because she could not fulfill her promise to Shanno, of getting justice done to Arjun. Shanno left a letter for Keya after her death asking her to take care of Amu, to give her a new name, a new identity. In it Shanno also expressed her suffering in not being able to do something for her son. The letter said:

Why did I leave him [Arjun] alone in that room? I can’t live with that. [. . .] You must make her [Amu] forget everything. She must never know. She is small, she will forget. Give her a new identity, a new history. A new life. This is my dying wish. (131)

In order to make atonements, Kaju decided to rear Amu and took her to United States, far from the traumatic history of the 1984 riots.

Towards the end of the novel nearly every character attempt to arrive at a position of acceptance in life by seeking to come to terms with his or her traumatic past. The conflict within Kaju is resolved and her fragmented self is united after she comes to reintegrate with her past. Bose describes Kaju's renewed self as:

1984 was *finally over*. It was Tuesday, 28 February, 2002. Kaju woke up to that day feeling, for the first time, *whole rather than fragmented*. Despite her new painful knowledge, she actually found herself renewed. (133, emphasis mine)

Keya too felt relieved because the truth she constantly avoided was finally revealed. Last but not the least, Kabir's endeavor in writing a play on the 1984 riots – called *Woh Kaali Raat* [that dark night] (134, italics in original text) also served a therapeutic purpose in representing the murky past of Delhi riots to a significant and extensive audience. Hence, the therapeutic role of literature that this paper intended to explore at the beginning is finally achieved after each character comes to reconciliation with oneself at the end of the novel. The opportunity that the narrative provides allows possibilities of healing to the survivors of trauma.

*Amu* successfully traces a relation between literature and trauma by highlighting how a traumatic experience when recounted is palliative if not curative. The sense of guilt and shame that unsettles the witness is purged off to some extent if not completely when it is verbalized to a listener or readers of a novel in this case. *Amu* depicts the strong presence of traumatic memory in our lives. No matter how much we try to deny its impact, traumatic memory urges narration. Finally, when represented in fiction, it not only expresses the ordeal of the sufferers but also offers to mourn for the departed and the victims, who have not been paid attention. By writing about this concealed history, Shonali Bose, like a therapist, records the suffering of the survivors and tries to reintegrate the history back into our lives, so that we can begin the process of healing. The novel opens up a possibility to both re-live and relieve the unassimilated past, grieve for the dead, convey the trauma of the survivors and finally to arrive at a reconciliation through fiction.

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