



Memory and Trauma: Experiences of Three Women Anglophone Kashmiri Writers

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Abstract:

The paper seeks to analyse aspects of trauma and memory in three works by Anglophone women writers from Kashmir, namely, Sudha Koul's *The Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir* (2002), Asiya Zahoor's *Serpents Under My Veil* (2019) and Farah Bashir's *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* (2021). These writers seek to represent, through their personal experiences, the conflict in the valley as lived by a section of women far removed from the centre of action and experiencing a form of trauma that does not necessarily result from expressly catastrophic events in their own personal lives. Rather, their trauma draws from persistently disrupted lives, a sense of constant apprehension and departure from normalcy that such a context must necessarily involve. While it is common to discuss and theorise on the more explicit forms of violence that occur in conflict zones, the paper argues, through tools of trauma and memory studies, that a specifically gendered form of trauma arises in female subjects through this forced erosion of normalcy and prolonged domestic confinement.

Keywords: conflict in Kashmir, trauma, memory, Anglophone women's writing.

Conflict in Kashmir: An Overview

Drawing as it does from a rich and eclectic fount of a long historical tradition, continuing cultural memory, and overlying trauma wrought by intervention from the world beyond the idyllic valley, the Kashmiri imagination visualises itself within the self-contained identity of being Kashmiri. This sense of distinctness, etched in the Kashmiri imagination as confined within the boundaries of this valley sustained by the River Jhelum, leads to the formation of a sense of community that is unique, succinctly expressed through the concept of *Kashmiriyat*. The current Kashmir issue can be historically read as having its origin in the indecision of the Hindu Dogra Maharaja of Kashmir, Hari Singh, in making his choice about whether to accede to India or to Pakistan in 1947, during the time of Indian Independence. While the Maharaja was a Hindu himself, the majority of his subjects were Muslims, as explained by Mridu Rai in her book *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects*. The Maharaja's choice to accede to India was ultimately brought about by a tribal Pukhtoon invasion, allegedly sponsored by Pakistan to corner the Maharaja into making a decision in its favour, but ironically resulting in the Maharaja seeking out the help of the Indian armed forces to end the rampage. This, in turn, allowed for Kashmir to be incorporated within the Indian state. Kashmir has since continued to be the backdrop of conflict between India and Pakistan on one hand, and armed forces and local elements on the other, leading to the disruption of this paradise on earth and turning it into a zone of conflict.

The decade of the 1990s was a particularly conflict-ridden period for Kashmir, the spurt in episodes of conflict directly resulting in the number of literary works produced by the generation of Kashmiris that grew up during this time under the constant shadow of terrorist attacks, ensuing curfews, blockades and civil unrest. Anglophone literary works by Kashmiri writers from both the Muslim and Pandit communities, such as Agha Shahid Ali, Sudha

Koul, Basharat Peer, Rahul Pandita, Siddhartha Gigoo, Nitasha Kaul, Mirza Waheed, Gowhar Geelani, Farah Bashir, Asiya Zahoor, and others, seek to represent the lived Kashmiri trauma to the world, while attempting to process through the act of writing the trauma of lost homes, marred landscape of this paradise on earth and changed cultural patterns that have evolved in response to the prevailing conditions.

This paper will investigate three works by Anglophone women writers from Kashmir. These works are Sudha Koul's memoir *The Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir*, Asiya Zahoor's poetry collection *Serpents Under My Veil*, and Farah Bashir's memoir *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir*, first published in 2002, 2019 and 2021, respectively. Through these works, this paper will analyse and understand the nature and positioning of trauma faced by women vis-à-vis the socio-political situation in Kashmir.

Koul's memoir offers the perspectives of three generations of Kashmiri Pandit women and was amongst the first memoirs written in English by a Kashmiri, the title referring to the Mother Goddess depicted astride a tiger, revered by the Kashmiri Pandit community. Unlike the other two works under study, Koul's 2002 memoir mostly documents the pre-1990s Kashmiri experience, including the 1947 Pukhtoon invasion. Asiya Zahoor's 2019 poetry collection can be read as a memoir in the poetic form, allowing for the full play of symbolism that any trauma writing must necessarily involve. Farah Bashir's memoir, first published in 2021, documents a trapped girlhood lived under the shadow of curfews, intermittent violence and constant possibility of loss of family members or even war, in the 1990s.

Women, Trauma and Memory

This paper will argue that the works under study articulate a specifically gendered form of violence that is rooted not just in direct violence, but also in domestic confinement, constant surveillance, interrupted education and slow erosion of normalcy of daily life. As is commonly believed in trauma theory, the process of remembering and forgetting is complex when it comes to trauma narratives, lending them a certain degree of symbolism, fragmentariness and disjointedness. As far as narratives from zones of violence are concerned, the ones that discuss more explicit forms of violence by the male aggressor on the female subject, such as sexual assault, often used as a mode of punishment and humiliation, abound. However, the texts under consideration are written from the perspective of female subjects not necessarily subjected to such extreme forms of explicit violence, but rather narrated from the perspective of subjects whose lives are confined within the bounds of a limited space that a society stuck in a conflict zone offers them. All of them relate their stories from the position of an average Kashmiri caught in the crossfire of violence that occurs through no active intervention of themselves or their immediate family members. Their stories are that of the mundane (to the extent that such a term can be used in the given context), and relate their own lives or the lives of their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, other female relatives and acquaintances. The trauma that they represent is the internalised trauma of lives quite not lived within bounds of normalcy. They trace the history of the changing domestic landscape, as experienced by women whose lives did not involve the trauma of killed or disappeared male family members or rapes or becoming what is known as half widows in the valley to refer to women whose husbands' dead bodies were never found. This gap is what this paper seeks to address.

Laura S. Brown, in her essay “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, deliberates on what can be considered a valid trauma stressor, especially in the context of trauma faced by women. She states that from a legal or psychiatric standpoint, trauma was conventionally considered to be a resultant of an event of a certain magnitude of not a common nature (100–12). In this paper, we will go on to derive from Brown’s contention to the contrary to try to establish that a common occurrence of not any great magnitude can also be a valid trauma stressor for female, and also for male subjects.

Selma Leydesdorff et al. introduce the idea of trauma in *Trauma and Life Stories*:

In its original sense (derived from the Greek ‘traumatizo’, meaning to wound) trauma signified a blow or shock to the bodily tissues which led to injury or disturbance. Later this medical concept was extended to encompass the structures of the mind, developing a broader psychological and social reference. The American sociologist Kai T. Erikson, in his work on the trauma of major disasters, points out that if ‘trauma’ in its customary medical usage refers first and foremost to the shock and the event causing it (rather than to the impact of the injury on the body and mind), in the psychological literature the term is redefined to refer to the state of mind resulting from the shock, which disconnects the person involved from their relationship to the world... that, in fact, trauma may arise not only from an acute event but also from a persisting social condition. (1–2)

Literature Review and Gaps

Nitasha Kaul and Ather Zia write that while military occupation affects all genders, “feminist scholarship has shown us that the interlocking nature of militarism and masculinity means that competing patriarchies of oppression and resistance become mutually constitutive,

and women are at the sharp end of both” (35). In this context, it becomes crucial to understand how situations and their responses become gendered, especially within the personal inner lives of women lying outside the ambit of direct violence, while bearing the cross of its repercussions.

The genre of Kashmiri women’s writing in English is emerging, as is the scholarship around it, particularly in the context of more recent writers such as Zahoor and Bashir. This paper seeks to move beyond feminist/postcolonial or socio-cultural readings of these texts to examine the personal, inward disruption of feminine selfhood that occurs in invisible ways. Rakshan Rizwan, in the chapter “Imagining Local Cosmopolitanism and Cultural Human Rights in Sudha Koul’s *The Tiger Ladies*” in her book *Kashmiri Life Narratives: Human Rights, Pleasure and the Local Cosmopolitan* reads Koul’s work as a bildungsroman that “counters the androcentrism that dominates Kashmiri fictional and non-fictional life narratives by situating the Kashmiri woman as the subject of international human rights and as the producer and consumer of local cosmopolitan culture” (125). Rizwan probes Koul’s work as one that engages readers to explore the nuances of cultural human rights. However, this paper argues that these three works are representative texts that offer new ways of probing a specific kind of gendered trauma rooted in the disruption of normalcy in a conflict zone.

Trauma in the Context of Three Kashmiri Anglophone Women Writers

In this paper, when we talk about the trauma that these particular subjects suffered, we will be focusing on this very idea of a persisting social condition. Cathy Caruth describes this in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* as “the traumatising shock of a commonly occurring violence” (6). In the context of trauma, Caruth also talks about the act of repetition, where she draws extensively from Freud. In the case

of Kashmiri subjects, the act of facing repeated trauma daily occurs not only through their own repeated experiences, but also through the collective experience of the entire community. At the same time, what we observe in these texts is a lack of scope for collective processing of this grief and an inherent isolation in these experiences. The subject has to revisit this trauma to work through it. This revisiting is done through observation, analysis and processing through writing of the trauma suffered by the self and that of the collective. In the case of Kashmir, which remains a zone of intermittent conflict, the scope for public expression of this trauma remains relatively elusive.

Leydesdorff et al. draw on the reference of Bruno Bettelheim, who theorised that, “only when such personal histories are acknowledged can mourning hope to begin. The life story approach allows room for contradiction, a holistic richness, and complexity. It gives the opportunity to explore the relation between personal and collective experience, by focusing on remembering and forgetting as cultural processes” (qtd. in Leydesdorff et al. 11). In this context, we can draw upon Maurice Halbwachs’ idea of collective memory being maintained through stories that are passed on, retold and preserved. This is of particular importance in conflict zones where the scope of such preservation of collective memory becomes a precarious task.

The chapters of the memoirs in question indicate the gradual passage of time, be it Koul’s “Grandmothers”, “Mothers” and “Daughters”, or Bashir’s “Evening”, “Night”, “Early Hours”, “Dawn”, “Morning” and “Afterlife”, or even in the mention of spring in the title—a season that does not find a place in the nomenclature or structure of the chapters that bypass it to head directly into the “Afterlife”, to convey, in a pointed manner, that the arrival of spring in Kashmir is a rumour that never bears fruition. The result is an endless wait by the female self to be freed from the captivity of the home, a captivity brought about forcibly and violently through curfews, sporadic acts of sustained violence, or

apprehensions of the family members over the general safety of the sacrosanct and vulnerable female body in a zone of conflict.

The foreword to Zahoor's poetry collection, written by Shafi Shauq, states that Zahoor's "unique talent" (7) lies in the fact that she has been able to free herself from the anchorage of repetition—repetition that trauma narratives or the act of being traumatised itself is prone to bear. To achieve this, Zahoor has had to create a distance from her own self to inhabit a Medusa-like space—a figure that looks out into the world with eyes that can transfix and transform, even while keenly observing and processing. Zahoor's poetry draws on both Western mythology and local Kashmiri folkloric traditions to convey trauma that she attempts to process from the perspective of her own distanced persona, in a manner that is symbolic, allusive and deliberately fragmentary.

Much of the trauma faced by this female self—a self that lies beyond the pale of direct acts of violence in the conflict zone—draws from this interplay of paranoia regarding stepping outdoors and, at the same time, the forced confinement indoors. An image that recurs in the works of Bashir and Zahoor is that of a self that stares out of a tiny gap or through a window, not daring to go beyond, yet at the same time panopticonically watching what lies outdoors—a world seemingly at hand but perennially out of reach. In Zahoor's poem "Medusa in a Burkha", the Kashmiri burkha-clad Medusa, with only eyes visible, imagines herself free, for once, from the confines of an enclosed space as she stares down the guns that men in the middle of action trot. From within this limited visible space of the burkha, she metaphorically exerts great strength:

but dare not look into my eyes

for I will turn you into a stone.

I am a Millennial Medusa

serpents under my veil, (17)

In “Snowman”, Zahoor again writes, “I look out of a window/ Charcoal eyes of a snowman glare back at me” (45). The idyllic snowman here assumes the form of a bogeyman, symbolising the male gaze that seeks to prohibit and control the female self.

Zahoor’s “Hawa Mahal” constructs the popular historical structure as a series of nine hundred and ninety-nine windows, designed so that while the queens could stare outdoors, none from the outside could see them. The poem is printed in landscape mode, typographically recreating the structure of the Hawa Mahal through the length and placement of the lines, with the sub-sections named as numbered windows, rendering the reader’s experience with a more immediate spatial aspect. It is within this palace that the visiting tourist finds herself trapped, the guide lost and no exit gate in sight—“...but I saw an eye on every window intensely looking at me” (52).

The window, or the tiny gap, in the works of these Kashmiri writers does not act as the conventionally perceived bridge to the outside world but rather as a symbol of containment and confinement. Bashir’s memoir keeps returning to the image of the window, from the perspective not just of women, but also of men and children trapped inside. She writes:

In the late autumn of 1990, it had already been three seasons since we had opened the windows, especially ones overlooking the street. Open windows were an easy and unobstructed passage for bullets and grenade splinters to make their way inside. Even a peep could be dangerous. (24)

Bashir continues to describe residents' attempts to further efface their homes by hanging layers of thick crewel curtains and minimising lights inside homes after dark. However, it is through these windows that things keep slipping in and out—children residing in the vicinity of Nigeen Lake spend delirious nights under the flashing searchlights of the armed forces that patrol the lake, the visiting aunt takes to opening the windows a crack to sneak a salute to the passing regiment because she thinks the show of respect will not go unnoticed during the next search operation of the house.

Koul's memoir similarly reflects the trauma of a life forced indoors. Her 2002 memoir describes a Kashmir that precedes the spurt of violence that characterised the 1990s, but it foreshadows the threat of violence that took on a more concrete shape later. Her memoir documents in detail the rituals, myths and cultural practises of Kashmiri Pandit families, exploring the points of confluence of Kashmiri Pandit and Muslim lives. Her narrative looks inwards, in a way that is reflective, domestic and deliberately gendered. Koul, almost a child of the midnight, was born in 1947, under the shadow of the tribal Pukhtoon invasion that set the course for the political future of Kashmir. She moved to the United States of America after marriage, abandoning a career in the civil services in the hot heartland of India, Uttar Pradesh, in the 1970s. Her memoir looks back at the mythic past of her Kashmiri homeland and interweaves that recollection with the domestic cultural practices that have continued since. Her memoir foreshadows the violence-ridden future of Kashmir, especially in the case of the Pandit community, who eventually faced a mass exile from their homeland in the 1990s.

A recurrent theme in Koul's work, as well as in the two other works under consideration, is how conflict disrupts the academic lives of women in conflict zones. Koul writes, "The final examination for my master's degree is accomplished in bits and pieces because the political disturbances bring an unending stream of curfews upon us" (141).

This apprehension about a missed or delayed education takes on more paranoid forms in the 1990s in Bashir's work and becomes associated with the ultimate disruption of normalcy. She writes, "It was the first week of December and our exams were to begin soon. Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was demolished. We, in Kashmir, were put under preventive curfew, as if we didn't have enough curfews of our own. It impacted our exams" (127). Far removed from the active world of political affairs, the girlhood suffers from a rupture in the normalcy of getting an education, a right that had been accorded to them not too long ago. Koul describes how her conservative maternal family homeschooled her mother, while her comparatively progressive paternal side ensured her aunts were formally and well educated. In Zahoor's "When the River Plays Truant", a flooding Jhelum becomes a metaphor for violence: "wayward, it ran into our houses and / schools, knocking at our door /... washed off words from our books" (47). This possible loss of the word becomes indicative of the larger loss of voice in a socio-political scenario as well as the nature of the unheard voice of the female self, domestically and otherwise.

The female selfhood, as described in these works, also suffers from the unspoken trauma of being watched and scrutinised by the potential male aggressor, leading to a desire for effacement. The female body becomes a liability for the teenager Bashir who envies the camouflage print that the armed forces wear, the print hiding all signs of dirt and bloodstains, while her breasts become a burden at thirteen—"My breasts had just assumed their distinct, slightly protruding shape. I felt naked. I tried to fold into the schoolbag clutched in front of me. That was how I developed a hunch in my upper back" (105). Zahoor's bukha-clad Medusa, too, effaces the female body but for the eyes that stare back at the world and wreak havoc.

Neurosis of Trauma

Kai Erikson writes in his essay titled “Notes on Trauma and Community” in Caruth’s edited volume, “Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defence. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape—‘possesses’ you ...and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty” (183). This neurosis, born of the breakdown of an interior landscape, finds expression in Bashir when she describes repetitive patterns of behaviour among men and women stuck indoors. The men repeat the same stories again and again, while her mother knits and opens the same yarn, as if stuck in a loop of time. This neurotic repetition of storytelling becomes a desperate Halbwachsian attempt to resist the erasure of memory.

Bashir deliriously sees events from multiple perspectives of Kashmiri subjects—a woman whose son goes missing, a teenage girl who imagines the photograph of a lost close one multiply and replicate, a woman who loses a shoe in a protest march, yet another woman who sits amidst a garden of daffodils frequented by tourists, but the daffodils no longer symbolising beauty of nature but rather the eeriness of graves. Through the imagined experiences of other Kashmiri women, Bashir becomes a girl stuck infinitely within the perimeter of her home, with no recourse to escape but through imagination. Even this imagination takes on a twisted and neurotic expression that further hurtles her down the path of post-traumatic stress disorder that she is diagnosed with later. Her repetitive act of pulling out chunks of her hair becomes a form of self-inflicted punishment; a habit developed after a simple salon visit suddenly becomes a life-threatening venture out of home for her and her family members. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth sees these acts of repetition as re-traumatising, if not life-threatening, invariably altering “the chemical structure of the brain” (63).

Urvashi Butalia's introduction to *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir* discusses the more explicit, yet vastly undocumented, forms of violence that women face domestically in conflict zones. Bashir's book describes an instance of domestic violence faced by a woman, otherwise peacefully married to her husband who had lost some of his mental capabilities in a childhood accident. The husband, in the absence of any other form of articulation or redressal offered to him as a subject faced with a complete and total loss of power in a conflict zone, transfers his anger onto his domestic partner. The woman eventually commits suicide, bringing to a tragic close the possibility of an erstwhile promising domestic life. Butalia writes, "For women, then, the external violence of war or political conflict is not something that is happening 'out there', but it has made its way into their homes and hearths. Yet in the hierarchy of violence set up by such situations, the 'external' violence of conflict somehow comes to acquire much greater significance than the 'internal' violence of domestic strife, no matter that domestic strife may be generated, or exacerbated, by the external violence" (xvi).

Conclusion

The works under consideration in this paper serve to fill this gap in the exploration of women's voices from the valley, especially of those stuck within the boundaries of home, likely suffering from the unspoken "medical and psychological conditions related to stress and trauma" (Butalia xiii). As Butalia further writes, "It is now widely accepted that while women seldom create or initiate conflict, they ...are often its chief victims and sufferers ...The Kashmir conflict, for example, has generated a vast amount of analytical and historical literature; very little of it actually mentions women" (xii). This paper has sought to read and analyse these works from the perspective of women stuck infinitely within the perimeters of their homes, suffering a uniquely gendered form of trauma that finds little to no scope for expression or documentation. Reading the otherwise unheard

voices these works seek to convey becomes integral to understanding lives in zones of violence, alongside the more vocal and documented ones. They help us establish how invisible forms of violence can profoundly impact the inner landscape of feminine selfhoods caught in the crossfire of conflict zones.

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