

Recounting Trauma in Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night*

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Abstract—Literature and life are inseparable from each other. Literature mirrors, translates, and preserves particular period and the related circumstances of that time. Similarly, literary writings during the times of war or conflict are an act of documenting and testifying by writers who pen down and highlight the sufferings, violence, difficulties in their narratives that forms a body of literature having trauma, neurosis and other psychological complexities as dominant themes. The turbulent period from 1989 onwards in Kashmir remains to be a very sensitive socio-political period which has generated a lot of trauma and psychological disorders in its inhabitants. In this regard, the paper will try to focus on contemporary Kashmiri English writer, Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* (2008) in which he writes vividly about the said period and which has in its own way become a trauma narration. The paper will contextualize the said work within the theoretical framework of trauma and trauma narration as proposed by writers like Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, DoriLaub, Shoshana Felman, Jeffrey Alexander.

Keywords: 90s, Conflict, *Curfewed Night*, Kashmir, Trauma.

Discussion

Cathy Caruth defines trauma “an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 11). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1953), Sigmund Freud argues that trauma is characterized by the lack of integration of the traumatic event into consciousness at the time the event occurs, and that it can only be assimilated belatedly. In its disturbed and disrupted temporality, therefore, trauma for Freud represents the haunting of the individual by an image or event and testifies to the profoundly unresolved nature of the past. Trauma fiction not only dramatizes the experiences of the survivors but also provides for their cathartic effect of rehabilitation. As a recent body of literature Trauma fiction depicts trauma, neurosis and other psychological complexities as dominant themes.

The period from 1989 onwards remains to be a very sensitive socio-political period in the history of Jammu and Kashmir. On the one hand, was the majority of the state's Muslim population struggling and demanding the democratic assertion

of the right to self-determination and on the other hand, was the Occupational force retaliating. There was political instability, killings, arbitrary arrests, disappearances and the trauma. Victoria Schofield writes about the years since 1989, after the uprising began, “For the majority of the people, the ill-effects of living under siege have been tremendous. ... [N]o one has yet been able to evaluate the trauma of events on their lives since 1989” (182). Literature and life are inseparable from each other. Literature mirrors, translates, and preserves particular period and the related circumstances of that time. Contemporary Kashmiri literature is also replete with fiction on the resulting traumatic and neurotic conditions. Our mark in English writing begins with Agha Shahid Ali's (1949-2001) poetry that narrates the trauma and destruction of his homeland in his poetic works – *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) or *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001). Agha Shahid describes the chaotic scenario of the 1990s in the following words:

From windows we hear

Grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall

On us like ash. Black on us of flames

It cannot extinguish the neighborhoods

The homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers

Kashmir is burning (*I See Kashmir From New Delhi* 179)

Kashmiri writers by now have produced plethora of such literary narratives like fiction and non-fiction which is marked by the expression of trauma, grief and alienation that its people underwent all along these violent years. SuvirKaul is of the view that present writers from Kashmir are writing with sensitivity and responsibility and the literary texts are voicing traumatic experiences of Kashmiris with a particular stress on the human and experiential relations. Kaul states, “the particular circumstances of trauma demand an affective response that registers the emotional dimensions of the original” (72).

A few among the many literary feats published in the recent years are: Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* (2008), Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* (2011), Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* (2011) and *The Book of Gold Leaves* (2014), Shafi Ahmad's *The Half Widow* (2012), Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013), Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* (2014) and *Scattered Souls* (2016) and many more to the list. Other writers such as SudhaKoul, Subhash Kak, K.L. Chowdhari, Nitasha Koul, Lalita Pandit, Mohammad Zahid and Feroz Rather are also being increasingly recognised in the literary circles. *All these writers* portray their lived experiences of the conflict and highlight the collective trauma of their people.

Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night* (2008) was a torch bearer in case of Kashmiri English prose writing. Peer acknowledges that there were books written by people from almost every conflict zone but there were none from his own homeland in terms of English prose narrative to narrate the trauma and loss. He writes:

I felt the absence of our own telling, the unwritten books about the Kashmiri experience, from the bookshelves, as vividly as the absence of a beloved—the empty chair staring at you across the table in a coffee shop ... I knew I had to write. (*Curfewed Night* 95-96)

Basharat Peer was a teenager experiencing and witnessing the vibrant resistance movement. *Curfewed Night*, is the author's reminiscence about how Kashmir prior known for its beauty was marred by the conflict and violence which eventually got brutalized by fear, psychosis and trauma. Peer states in the book, "The war of my adolescence had started" (14). The author gives us a firsthand account of his growing up in the peak of insurgency. He assesses the societal mental health by interviewing the victims and documenting it in his book. In clear and lucid language, Peer elaborates how suffering, humiliation and other haunting memories of the conflict indelibly led the psychological growth of the victims (Peer 170). Basharat Peer mentions his own relatives who after having closely escaped the deadly militant attacks, developed serious psychotic disorders.

In this book, Basharat Peer talks about the setting of bunkers and checkpoints in the valley. Every person walking through or even near these points was made to stop and expose to the lawful violence. They were made to raise their arms and then in Peer's words, "a soldier frisked them and checked their identity cards" (20). Peer narrates this kind of inconvenience while describing his father's journey from the office to their house. He writes:

Almost every time he came home, it took him around five hours. On a lucky day his bus would only be stopped every fifteen minutes at a military checkpoint, he and other passengers made to stand in a queue, their raised hands holding an identity card and anything they carried—books and files in father's case. After a body search he would walk half a

mile away from the checkpoint and wait in another queue for the bus to arrive. (Peer 18)

Basharat Peer shows how the mental health of the younger generation under such suffocating conditions evolves in a conflict-ridden region. He narrates how children playing games like "army-militant" in the streets have false wooden-guns slung around their bodies and are mimicking the vast number of soldiers patrolling everywhere (Peer 81).

"Wartime sexual violence", which evolved since the onset of insurgency in the Valley was used as a means of psychological warfare in order to humiliate the people. In this regard, Basharat Peer refers to the gang rape of the bride (Mubeena) on the day of her marriage (Peer 150). Similarly, he highlights the mass rape of the women in the hamlets of Kunan and Poshpura where "Indian army raped more than twenty women in 1990" (Peer 156). These women became heavy sufferers of trauma. This led to what Jeffrey Alexander calls the construction of "cultural trauma". Jeffrey Alexander says:

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

Curfews and cordon-and-search operations which were in vogue during 90s find their place in *Curfewed Night*. Peer highlights about the mental and physical sufferings that befell on Kashmiris during these times as well. Peer has also brought into focus one of the grave issues that resulted due to the turmoil. Hundreds of young men were being brutally killed in extra-judicial killings and thousands went missing in the enforced disappearances which gave birth to "Half-widows"/ "Half-mothers" who continue to live eternal tormented lives. The author writes how every month people in Srinagar are seen holding sit-ins and raising their voices against the forceful custodial disappearances of their loved ones. Peer remarks:

Between 4000 and 8000 men have disappeared after being arrested by the military, paramilitary, and the police. Newspapers routinely refer to the missing men as 'disappeared persons.' And their waiting wives as 'half-widows'. (131)

Kai Erikson describes, one of the main tenets of collective trauma is that "one can speak of traumatized communities as distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons" (185). This can be related with Basharat Peer and his *Curfewed Night*. Peer mentions an ill-fated mother – Shameema, who sees one of her son (Shafi) killed by the forces and other (Bilal) about to be sent into the house with a mine in his hand. Peer quotes Shameema:

'God gave me courage that day. I fought with every soldier who tried to stop me. Normally you are scared of soldiers, but I did not stop that day till I reached the house where the encounter was going on.' ... 'I saw Bilal but Shafi was

missing, '... 'I ran towards Bilal, grabbed him by an arm ... As we walked away I saw them push an old man towards the house with the mine in his hands' (168-169).

She relentlessly fights with the army and manages to save Bilal. However, Bilal from that day suffers depression and mental issues and she has to "calm him down" (Peer 170) by providing him hookah. In a similar vein, renowned and leading Kashmiri psychiatrist, Dr. Mushtaq Margoob says:

Before 1989, there were no PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] cases, but now we have an epidemic of disorders in Kashmir. Generation after generation has been at the receiving end; anybody could get killed or humiliated - [it's] a condition of helplessness. So, it is a trans generational transmission of trauma (qtd. in *Aljazeera*, 2016)

On a similar note, Shoshana Felman and DoriLaub, describe that a trauma survivor's failure or inability to make sense of the event is what lies at the base of trauma. They write:

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

In his book, Peer exposed the torture cells, Papa-1 and Papa-2, into which large numbers of suspected people were captured and later their maimed bodies would be found floating on rivers. In the words of Basharat Peer, "Papa-2 was the most infamous torture centre run by the Indian forces in Kashmir." (137). Peer describes how hundreds of young Kashmiri boys were rendered impotent because of torture methods used on them. The methods used on them are most shocking of all. They describe that army would use electric shocks to their genitals. "Hundreds who were taken to Papa-2 did not return. Those who returned were wrecks" (Peer 137). These victims remain to be psychologically disturbed for the rest of their lives. This kind of brutal torture caused by the armed forces led to the further dramatization and alienation of Kashmiri population towards the hegemony.

Conclusion

Trauma narration and testifying is a current issue in contemporary Kashmiri English literature. Writers take the responsibility of presenting the reality of life through their narratives. They document and bring forth tales of eternal suffering and collective trauma of their people. Basharat Peer very emotionally presented those tormented days of Kashmir and its people. Salman Rushdie in his review of this book writes, "A passionate and important book a brave and brilliant report from a conflict the world has chosen to ignore."

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