

TRAUMA NARRATIVES AND THE REMAKING OF POLITICAL COMMUNITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: CONFLICT AND IDENTITY IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN* AND FARAH BASHIR'S *RUMOURS OF SPRING: A GIRLHOOD IN KASHMIR*

SUMITHRA V.M. AND DHANYA. P.

Department of English

Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady

Corresponding author: sumithravm18@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The paper critically engages with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) and Farah Bashir's *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* (2021), set in the context of the Biafran War (1967-1970) and the 1990 Kashmir Insurgency, respectively, within the framework of trauma theory, postcoloniality and neocolonialism. The selected works reflect how trauma disrupts and defamiliarizes the ordinary and the regular and invades the most intimate spaces. A traumatic event affects individuals emotionally, physically and mentally and causes a rupture in identity. It further redefines the self with the memory of the past trauma. In the case of a social event, the post traumatic social order produces new subjects. The paper engages with this dual nature of trauma in its impact on collective identity. It works in alliance with Micheal Rothberg's argument that trauma is collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal and linguistic). Through the reading of the texts, the paper critiques the applicability of the traditional (Western) trauma model to the postcolonial context on two fronts, both indebted to Freudian psychoanalysis: one, its emphasis on belatedness, and two, its position that collective trauma undermines collective cohesion. It posits that collective trauma produces active political community rather than

subjects suspended in traumatic afterward. It further argues that the narratives from the Global South presents an alternate paradigm to trauma theory by reorienting the field towards recuperation, resilience and subversion.

Key Words: Trauma, identity, postcoloniality, neocolonialism, Global South.

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of trauma studies emerged in the early 1990s, addressing human suffering and its representation in cultural texts.

Initially centred on Holocaust literature, trauma theory aimed to bear witness to traumatic histories and foster cross- cultural solidarity. However, postcolonial critics have highlighted its Eurocentric bias and neglect of non-Western and minority cultural traumas. This paper examines the transformation of trauma studies focusing on the representation of trauma in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Farah Bashir's *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir*.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A comprehensive understanding of trauma in cultural trauma theory requires an examination of its origin in Freudian psychoanalysis. While the DSM's (the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the

American Psychiatric Association) third edition in 1980 shifted towards a neuro- biological model, marginalising Freud, scholars agree that Freudian psychoanalysis remains the explicit foundation of trauma theory. This poses challenges for the dialogue between trauma theory and postcolonial studies, involving core concepts such as belatedness, collective traumatisation, and melancholia.

Freud's early work on hysteria explored trauma as repressed, painful experiences resurfacing in symptoms. Psychoanalysis aimed to help patients integrate these traumatic experiences. Initially focusing on repressed memories of actual traumatic events, Freud later emphasised the repression of infantile sexual experiences or fantasies, retrospectively becoming traumatic during adolescence. Belatedness, or *Nachträglichkeit*, became a central concept, describing trauma as the painful remembering of an experience. Cathy Caruth, a key figure in cultural trauma studies, posits two paradoxes of trauma based on Freud's *Nachträglichkeit*: an unusual temporality where trauma is fully evident only in connection with another place and time, and the literal yet latent nature of traumatic experiences.

It's crucial to note that Freud's theory emphasises internal, abstract causation over historically concrete factors, challenging postcolonialism's focus on historical and socio-political factors. While cultural trauma theory highlights temporality and history, differences exist in their representation in parallel, opposing currents of thought. The concept of the inaccessibility or unspeakability of trauma, widely accepted in trauma studies, faces an opposing yet equally influential perspective associated with Judith Herman's work. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1994), Herman argues that narrative serves as a therapeutic tool, facilitating the integration of

traumatic experiences and aiding in healing and recovery. This contrast, termed the "flat contradiction" in trauma theory, raises questions about the nature of trauma narrative—whether it leads to increased indeterminacy or therapeutic resolution (Luckhurst 82).

While the aporetic notion, emphasising trauma's resistance to narrative, remains a core concept in cultural trauma theory, Herman's therapeutic view has found resonance, particularly in literary criticism. Herman's theory acknowledges the recuperative and empowering qualities of narrative, contrasting with Caruth's perspective that narrativisation represents a loss of incomprehensibility.

The call for a decolonised trauma theory originated with the 2008 special issue of *Studies in the Novel*, which explored the intersection of trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies (Craps 1).

Prior to this, trauma theory, as conceptualised in the 1990s by scholars like Cathy Caruth, had faced criticism for its controversies and limitations. Roger Luckhurst's 2008 work, *The Trauma Question*, highlighted the theory's inconsistencies and its failure to address atrocity, genocide, and war, particularly in the context of postcolonial studies. The special issue of *Studies in the Novel* identified depoliticising tendencies in trauma theory as a major obstacle to its integration with postcolonial literary studies.

In response to the challenges identified, Michael Rothberg, in the same issue of *Studies in the Novel*, raised questions about whether trauma theory, as then conceptualised, provided the best framework for understanding violence in the colonised/postcolonial world (226). Rothberg emphasised the need to move beyond Euro-American frameworks and called for the development of tools to confront racial and

colonial violence, coining the term decolonizing trauma studies (226). The ongoing discourse has focused on critiquing trauma theory's Eurocentrism, its event-based conception of trauma, its narrow reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis, and its deconstructionist approach.

Post-2008, scholars recognised the need for a new model to understand trauma in culturally and historically specific ways. Critics like Craps argued for accounting for social and historic relations in trauma studies, situating traumatic histories against dominant group histories (55). Over time, postcolonial scholarship has discarded the Eurocentric, event-based model of the original trauma theory, making the field more comprehensive and culturally specific. This shift has also allowed a departure from the Freudian foundation of classic trauma theory, challenging Caruth's reliance on Freudian psychoanalysis and poststructuralist deconstruction (Rothberg 230).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative literary analysis of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Bashir's *Rumours of Spring*. It examines how each work portrays trauma, resilience, and the socio-political contexts of Nigeria and Kashmir, respectively. By analysing character development, narrative structure, and thematic elements, this study aims to elucidate how these texts contribute to the decolonisation of trauma theory.

4. ANALYSIS

Half of a Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a tour de force that captures the wrenching realities of the Nigerian Civil War. Through rich prose and deeply human characters, Adichie paints a vivid picture of the war-torn

landscape, exploring the complexities of love, resilience, and the devastating impact of conflict on individuals and communities. Set against the backdrop of Nigeria's struggle for Biafran independence in the late 1960s, the novel follows the lives of a diverse cast of characters whose paths intertwine in unexpected ways. The reader is drawn into the world of Ugwu, a young and impressionable houseboy; Olanna, a woman from a privileged background navigating love and loss; and Richard, a British writer enthralled by Igbo art and culture.

Adichie's storytelling prowess shines as she expertly weaves together the personal and the political, providing an intimate portrayal of how war disrupts lives and fractures societies. The novel's title, derived from the symbol on the Biafran flag, serves as a poignant metaphor for the fractured hopes and aspirations of a nation torn apart by conflict. Through this masterpiece, Adichie confronts themes of identity, loyalty, and the resilience of the human spirit amidst the chaos of war. Her poignant prose and profound insights into the human condition makes the novel a compelling and unforgettable exploration of love and loss in the face of unimaginable adversity.

The novel is deeply rooted in the social and historical context of Nigeria during the 1960s, particularly focusing on the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, which took place from 1967 to 1970. The novel vividly captures the sociopolitical landscape and the complexities of ethnic tensions that led to the conflict. One crucial aspect is the backdrop of Nigeria gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1960. The post-colonial era was marked by power struggles, ethnic divisions, and political instability as different ethnic groups vied for control in a newly formed nation. The book

reflects the societal divisions among Nigeria's major ethnic groups – the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa-Fulani – and the subsequent secession of the Igbo-dominated southeastern region, leading to the formation of the Republic of Biafra and the ensuing civil war.

In the novel, the lingering aspects of neo-colonialism are palpable as the characters navigate post-independence Nigeria, grappling with the remnants of colonial influence amidst the turmoil of the Nigerian Civil War. Adichie intricately weaves historical events into the lives of her characters, providing a human perspective on the war's impact. The novel delves into the experiences of individuals and families caught in the turmoil,

highlighting the struggles, suffering, and resilience of ordinary people amidst the chaos of conflict. It portrays how political decisions and ethnic tensions have profound, personal repercussions, disrupting lives and tearing apart the fabric of communities.

Furthermore, Adichie addresses broader social issues prevalent in Nigeria at that time, such as class disparities, gender roles, and the influence of Western culture. The characters' diverse backgrounds and experiences allow Adichie to explore the multifaceted nature of Nigerian society and the complexities of navigating personal identities in a country undergoing significant transformation. By embedding the narrative within this historical context, the novel becomes a powerful testament to the human cost of war and a poignant exploration of the intersection between personal lives and larger historical events.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, writing serves as a powerful tool that contributes positively to various aspects of the characters' lives amidst the chaos and devastation of the Nigerian Civil

War. Firstly, writing becomes a means of documentation and expression for characters like Richard, the British expatriate. He uses his writing to document the events unfolding around him, capturing the stories and experiences of the people affected by the war. His desire to document the Igbo culture and history through his writing reflects a sense of preserving a heritage threatened by conflict. Secondly, for Ugwu, the young houseboy, learning how to read and write under the tutelage of his employer, Odenigbo, marks a significant transformation. It empowers Ugwu, providing him with a sense of agency and opening up new opportunities for personal growth and self-expression. Writing becomes a means for Ugwu to navigate the complexities of the world around him and to articulate his thoughts and experiences. Additionally, Olanna, through her letters to her sister Kainene, finds solace and a means of connection in the midst of separation and turmoil. Her letters become a way to maintain a semblance of normalcy, fostering a sense of emotional support and solidarity despite the distance imposed by the war. Writing also acts as a form of resistance against the erasure of history and culture during times of conflict. By preserving stories and memories through writing, the characters reclaim their narratives and attempt to counter the destructive forces of war that threaten to obliterate their identities and heritage. *Rumours of Spring: A Girlhood in Kashmir* is a poignant memoir penned by Farah Bashir. The book offers a deeply personal account of the author's experiences growing up in the tumultuous region of Kashmir. Bashir vividly recounts her childhood against the backdrop of political turmoil, social upheaval, and conflict in Kashmir.

Through vivid storytelling, the memoir delves into the complexities of daily life in a region

marred by conflict, capturing the nuances of family, community, and identity amidst the challenges and uncertainties brought about by political unrest. Bashir's narrative sheds light on the impact of the conflict on ordinary lives, particularly on the lives of women and children, offering a unique perspective on the human dimensions of conflict in Kashmir. The memoir invites readers into a world where personal stories intersect with broader socio-political realities, providing a heartfelt and illuminating glimpse into the experiences of growing up in a region marked by unrest and the resilience required to navigate such turbulent circumstances.

The Rumours of Spring unfolds against the backdrop of the troubled history, rich cultural heritage, and complex social fabric of Kashmir. The memoir captures the tumultuous period of the late 20th and early 21st centuries when Kashmir experienced significant political upheaval, including the insurgency and conflict between India and Pakistan over territorial claims. The memoir poignantly captures the ongoing struggles of Kashmir amidst neo-colonial dynamics, portraying the region's complexities as it contends with political unrest and external influences long after the era of direct colonial rule.

The memoir explores the impact of the conflict on the lives of individuals and communities in Kashmir. It sheds light on the struggles, challenges, and resilience of the people, particularly women and children, who often bear the brunt of conflicts. Issues such as displacement, loss, identity, and the struggle for normalcy amidst the unrest might be central themes in understanding the social context portrayed in the book. *Rumours of Spring* provides an intimate portrayal of the historical,

cultural, and social dimensions of Kashmir, offering a deeply personal perspective on growing up in a region plagued by conflict while celebrating the resilience and spirit of its people and their heritage.

Trauma is a significant theme woven through the narrative. The memoir delves into the enduring impacts of neo-colonialism and subsequent political conflicts on the lives of individuals and communities in Kashmir. Kashmir's history includes a colonial past, with the region being a princely state before India's independence in 1947. The aftermath of colonisation, coupled with the political complexities arising from India and Pakistan's territorial disputes, has resulted in prolonged conflict and instability in Kashmir. The memoir explores the psychological, emotional, and societal traumas inflicted by political unrest and conflict. It delves into the lived experiences of the author and the people of Kashmir, highlighting the profound and long-lasting effects of violence, displacement, loss, and uncertainty.

The trauma portrayed in the book extends beyond physical violence, touching on the psychological scars left by decades of unrest. It discusses the collective trauma experienced by a generation growing up amidst conflict, dealing with disrupted education, limited opportunities, and the constant spectre of violence shaping their formative years. The memoir offers a deeply personal account of how trauma manifests in everyday life—how it affects familial relationships, shapes identities, and influences perceptions of the world. Through the author's lens, readers gain insight into the complexities of healing, resilience, and the struggle to reclaim a sense of normalcy and dignity in the face of enduring turmoil.

Writing serves as a positive and empowering tool amidst the turmoil and challenges faced by the author and the people of Kashmir. For Farah Bashir, the act of writing becomes a means of reclaiming agency and voicing her experiences. Through the memoir, she uses writing as a form of self-expression and documentation, allowing her to preserve her memories, emotions, and reflections.

In doing so, she transcends the limitations imposed by the conflict and asserts control over her narrative, offering a powerful outlet for self-discovery and healing.

Additionally, writing becomes a medium of connection and empathy. Bashir's memoir allows readers to empathise with the struggles faced by the people of Kashmir, fostering understanding and solidarity across cultural and geographical boundaries. By sharing her story through writing, she bridges gaps and raises awareness about the human dimensions of conflict, encouraging dialogue and empathy.

Moreover, in the context of Kashmir's rich literary heritage, writing holds a special significance. The act of storytelling, particularly in a region with a strong oral tradition, becomes a way to preserve Kashmiri culture, traditions, and history. Bashir's memoir contributes to this legacy by documenting her personal experiences, cultural nuances, and the social fabric of Kashmir, ensuring that these stories endure beyond the immediate challenges of the conflict. Ultimately, writing in *Rumours of Spring* emerges as a positive force—a means of empowerment, connection, and preservation. It enables the author to reclaim her narrative, share her experiences with the world, and contribute to the collective storytelling heritage of Kashmir, offering a ray of hope and resilience amidst the adversities faced by the region.

Scholars, including contributors to *Studies in the Novel (StiN)*, criticise Cathy Caruth's Freudian trauma model for its emphasis on melancholia and fragility, arguing it limits the understanding of post-traumatic experiences. Both the works under discussion work against such a model in their focus on resilience and resistance. These works look forward to the future instead of dwelling in a traumatic aftermath, a departure from the narrative emphasised by the traditional trauma theory model. Postcolonial scholars call for reconceiving trauma theory to encompass life-affirming and activist processes, challenging the hegemony of Caruth's perspective. Since 2008, there is a consensus that the injunction to focus on weakness and melancholia in postcolonial trauma fiction has been overcome, marking a crucial step in decolonising trauma theory. Despite disagreements, Caruth's notion of enduring and unknowable trauma is acknowledged, allowing for a nuanced understanding that includes resilience and growth in post-traumatic narratives.

In the decolonising project, the debate over early trauma theory's deconstructionist narrative approach has been a key concern, questioning the value of narrative in trauma understanding. Cathy Caruth's aporetic stance, emphasising indeterminacy and denying resolution, contrasts with psychiatrist Judith Herman's therapeutic view, considering narratives crucial for healing and recovery.

Postcolonial literature supports the notion that trauma necessitates narrative for coming to terms with colonial wounds. Adichie's and Bashir's works add to this tradition.

In the trajectory of decolonising trauma theory, there is a need for a more respectful acknowledgment of culturally specific spiritual and religious perspectives. The dominant influence of secular rational thinking, rooted in

Western postmodern culture, often obstructs engagement with spirituality, ritual, and ceremony in postcolonial trauma narratives. The postmodern tendency to regard the world as thoroughly and satisfactorily secularised limits the ability to understand and appreciate indigenous rituals and cultural practices that situate trauma in a broader context.

Decolonising trauma theory should involve a shift away from the dismissiveness of materialism in its approach to spirituality while maintaining rigor in analysis. Research in social studies supports the idea that spirituality can be a pathway to resilience and recovery from trauma, emphasising the importance of a respectful approach to religious and spiritual issues in therapeutic processes. A turn towards engaging with spirituality may enhance the critical work in postcolonial trauma studies, providing a more comprehensive understanding of human experience. Farah Bashir's illumination of faith in her narrative assumes the role of a recuperating mechanism. Faith, in her narrative, cannot be dissociated from the conflict they experience.

The critical questioning of trauma theory's central tenets becomes crucial for the postcolonialisation of trauma studies, particularly in its application to culturally specific frameworks for understanding historically induced traumas of colonisation, neo-colonisation and decolonisation. Trauma theory must be expanded to accommodate inquiries into the complex dynamics of trauma during colonisation and the processes of self-construction during decolonisation. This involves addressing issues of complicity, guilt, and agency, which are central in postcolonial contexts. Moreover, a postcolonial trauma theory should engage critically with the Eurocentric

focus of trauma theory, especially regarding the concept of collective trauma. The current Freudian model, which suggests that trauma weakens collective cohesion, is questioned by contributors to the StiN project. They resist the notion that trauma necessarily damages social bonds, advocating for a more culturally sensitive formulation of collective trauma. The chosen works from two distinct regions in the global south, addressing trauma, illustrate how collective trauma fosters an engaged political community that resists oppression. Both the narratives reflect the way in which conflict and trauma interrupt and reshape individual and collective identity, giving rise to new political subjects.

5. CONCLUSION

The prevailing emphasis in trauma theory on the debilitating effects of trauma, often centred around PTSD and its symptoms, has implications for the interpretation of postcolonial literature. Some argue that this emphasis may perpetuate frozen or suspended post-traumatic conditions, limiting interpretations to themes of victimisation and melancholia while obscuring themes of recuperation and resilience. This perspective may not align with the diverse and vibrant visions of cultural recuperations present in postcolonial literature.

The resistance to framing postcolonial conditions as chronically weakened or socially divided is rooted in a rejection of Eurocentric Orientalist notions.

Postcolonial literary critics assert that reducing postcolonial identities to melancholic, weakened states contradicts the vigorous and imaginative impact of postcolonial literature. They emphasise the need to resist such reductions, maintaining a focus on political contextualisation and the

ongoing struggles against colonial legacies and contemporary neo-imperial globalization.

In considering the intersection of trauma theory and postcolonial studies, the aesthetics of trauma theory would need to be reconceived to theorise not only melancholia and stasis but also processes inducing resilience. This reconceptualization aligns with postcolonialism's emphasis on a commitment to the continuation of life, and it may involve incorporating agency and empowerment as modes of theorising trauma's aftermath. The conclusion suggests a need for the reconstruction of trauma theory to respond to postcolonial ways of understanding history, memory, and trauma. This reconstruction might involve reorienting towards forward-looking narratives that aim for the subversion of traumatic experiences rather than their containment in melancholia.

6. WORKS CITED

Craps, Stef. Wor(l)ds of Grief: Traumatic Memory and Literary Witnessing in Cross Cultural Perspective. *Textual Practice*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 51-68.

DOI:10.1080/09502360903219808

Craps, Stef and Gert Buelens.

"Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma

Novels. *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, no.

½, The John Hopkins UP, 2008, pp. 1-12.

Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*, Routledge, 2008.

Rothberg, Michael. †Decolonising Trauma Studies: A Response. *Studies in Novel*, vol. 40, no. ½, The John Hopkins UP, 2008, pp. 224-234.