

Self-transformation through Traumatic Encounter: Pakistani Diaspora Women after 9/11

Aamir Shehzad¹
Shaheena Ayub Bhatti²

Abstract

*The events of September 11, 2001 were responsible for physically and psychologically devastating the lives of millions of people directly or indirectly, exhibiting aggression, sorrow and trauma. The aftermath of the incident brought Muslim immigrants to a precarious position where the name became synonymous with terrorism. Muslim immigrants in the US and other countries became vulnerable to the outcome of this tragic experience. Consequent upon this overwhelming life experience, numerous studies including fictional creations have been undertaken to analyze the psychological effects of September 11 and the identity crisis in its aftermath. The present study was conducted to present and illustrate the concept of psychological trauma and self-transformation of female immigrants in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy. The analysis is based on Shaila Abdullah's novel **Saffron Dreams** (2009) focusing on the complex process of traumatic healing. The study concludes that the novel does not only portray the traumatic encounters of immigrants but also showcases the process of healing and overcoming traumatic distress of those directly involved in the tragedy of 9/11.*

Keywords: Trauma, Diaspora, Post-9/11 Identity Crisis, Healing, Self-transformation

1. Introduction

Trauma is a cognitive distress that is the result of a painful experience. It imbibes physical and psychological harm that shatters the sense of safety and makes an individual feel nervous and helpless. Since trauma is a psychological response to a terrible event, it contains physical and psychological torture that results in persistent personality damage. Traumatic experience is categorized differently in terms of its effect on men and women; and reactions to trauma differ for individual and collective responses. For example, coping with the death of a dear one carries a different impression for a man and a woman; similarly it will affect an individual or a group of people in different ways. Immigrant women, who undergo traumatic experiences, are more likely to surrender easily although women may also show resilience and undergo a healing and recovery process. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the traumatic experience of a Pakistani woman who loses her husband and is the victim of post 9/11 violence in the US. This article argues that Shaila Abdullah's novel *Saffron Dreams* (2009) exhibits the traumatic encounter of a Pakistani diaspora woman and her self-transformation in the wake of 9/11. Arissa, the main character, is obsessed with the triple experience of trauma: she relocates to America, suffers the death of her husband, and encounters identity crisis in the

¹ Assistant Professor, Government College of Management Sciences, Mansehra, KP

² Professor & Director, Women Research & Resource Center, FJWU, Rawalpindi

aftermath of 9/11. The study shows her resilience in the face of trauma and personal transformation.

The word trauma has been derived from the Greek word *Traumat* meaning “wound”. It was first used by Sigmund Freud in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1955) while studying the veteran soldiers of WWI (Caruth, 1996: p.3). Freud explains trauma with regard to surprise and fright; according to him it is a state “a person gets into when he runs into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise” (p.30). Although in the beginning it was studied in connection with physical wounds, it later developed into different experiences pertaining to psychological injuries. Judith Herman (1992) explored the concept of trauma, explaining it as “an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force... traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary system of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning” (p.33). Herman emphasizes the psychological effects of trauma in terms of helplessness or despair. We know that every traumatic event results in physical and psychological damage but psychological symptoms remain long after physical injuries have healed.

Another important theorist in trauma studies is Cathy Caruth who was influenced by the descriptions of both Freud and Herman. In her theoretical and philosophical text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) she presents the concept of trauma through its application to history and literature. According to Caruth “the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (p.3). She further explains, “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon” (p.12).

Caruth’s understanding of trauma is explored and interpreted through “the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature and of literary theory ...which speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience” (p.5). These texts explore the complex nature of trauma, where;

Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language (p.4).

Caruth’s attempt at interpreting these texts is “not just to follow each author’s argument in its explicit reference to traumatic experience” (p.5) but to comprehend what is known and yet not known. She exposes in these texts “a different story, the story or the textual itinerary of insistently recurring words or figures” (p.5).

Trauma has been categorized differently pertaining to the devastation it brings such as natural calamity, war, displacement, terrorism, domestic violence etc and every typology

of trauma carries physical or psychological stress. Traumatic experiences “can be simple or complex in nature and result in simple or complex forms of post-traumatic adaptation” (Wilson, 2005, p.3). Trauma isolates individuals from community. As a result people experience persistent despair and psychic numbness which badly affects their capacity to make use of community assistance and ability to react positively. According to Judith Herman (1992) “trauma isolates” and that every traumatic event “destroy[s] the sustaining bonds between individual and community” (p.124). She further states that “the failure to complete the normal process of grieving perpetuates the traumatic reaction” (p.69). Since trauma involves the process of breaking off the association between individual and its community, recovery requires re-establishing a sense of community;

those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of growth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection with others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience (p.124).

In other words the sense of belonging or sustaining relationship with society is essential for getting rid of trauma. In a similar vein, Diane Myers (2001), a psychiatric nurse and trauma specialist says, “it is because trauma isolates that we need to reduce isolation and foster social connection to overcome alienation” (qtd. In Malekoff, 2008: p.36). Thus traumatic influence can be reduced through engaging in social interaction at large.

The core concern of this study is to examine trauma in connection with identity and how in particular female diaspora identity is transformed through traumatic experience. In this section I endeavor to interpret trauma with regard to identity crisis and identity formation. The relationship of trauma and identity is embedded through memory. Since trauma is remembrance of painful experience an individual undergoes, it influences one’s identity and perception. As Luckhurst (2013) writes, “from myriad physical symptoms, trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in peculiar ways” (p.1). Every detrimental event can result in trauma which is unacceptable and incomprehensible to the mind and constantly and overwhelmingly pricks the memory of the traumatized person and shatters the normal functioning of the mind.

2. Trauma and identity crisis

Identity disruption is central to the post-traumatic experience because trauma necessitates the basic survival for individual over the normal development of the self. Trauma has a complex relationship with identity depending upon the nature of traumatic exposure. For instance if a person experiences a road accident, it will be traumatizing enough but may not affect a person’s identity; how he thinks and feels about himself. On the other hand a person experiencing ethnic victimizing being in diaspora is likely to suffer identity catastrophe which will ultimately influence his values and beliefs; essential characteristics to define his sense of self. Values and beliefs about the self and the world can possibly be disrupted by event centrality; “event centrality refers to the degree to which the traumatic event is central to one’s identity or sense of self” (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006: p.221).

Identity formation is an essential part of human development, and develops across a lifetime. In consequence of traumatic experience and/or identity crisis, people naturally look for outside assistance but some people may look inward for help. Both outer and inner reliance collectively contribute to the healing process. A person is bound with a community which ultimately affects his/her inward construction. Looking at one's self with regards to the outer environment the victim comes closer to developing a sense of self. As Herman (1992) elucidates, "mirrored in the actions of others, the survivor recognizes and reclaims a lost part of herself. At that moment, the survivor begins to rejoin the human commonality" (p. 212). Trauma affects our identity and the way we perceive and respond to the event; and it can also determine the way we transform from the event. Thus it can be conceded that the individual's response to a traumatic event can result either in self-transformation or deformation. It can lead to post traumatic disorder or post traumatic order (development). A person with high self-esteem is capable of reducing the adverse effects of trauma and increasing the favourable effects. Similarly the effects of trauma on men and women are different in nature. Men are strong enough to cope with traumatic events but women are meek so they undergo catastrophic experience. As Brands (2003) states, "women differ in the types of trauma they experience and in their responses to trauma, including the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" (p.759). Women are meek hearted as compared to men consequently they lack physical and emotional strength to deal with the catastrophic aftermath of traumatic experience.

The events of 9/11 have been portrayed in various literary and critical studies. Although the terrorist attacks on WTC are not directly related to the literary domain, literature cannot remain uninfluenced by any social and political issue. Some literary voices both within the US and from outside emerged on the literary canvas to recapitulate the havoc caused by this tragic event and trauma in its aftermath. A large number of novels have been published since September 2001, among them are; *Between Two Rivers* by Nicholas Rinaldi, *The Emperor's Children* by Clair Messud, *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, *The Memory Of Things* by Gae Polisner, *Towers Falling* by Jewell Parker Rhodes, *The Submission* by Amy Waldman, *We All Fall Down* by Eric Walters, *Ask Me No Question* by Marina Budhos and *Transmission* by Hari Kunzru. Moreover, some Pakistani English novelists also wrote about the tragedy of 9/11 and how their fictional characters become victims of traumatic distress. Mohsin Hamid, Nadeem Aslam, Kamila Shamsie, Shaila Abdullah, and H.M Naqvi are notable among these writers of diaspora fiction.

Aroosa Kanwal (2015) in her paper *After 9/11: Trauma, Memory, Melancholia and National Consciousness* investigates trauma and immigrant identity in Nadeem Aslam's novels *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) and *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) by associating the traumatic experience of "an individual to the collective memory of a community or nation" (p.57). Kanwal argues that both novels are based in the context of post 9/11 scenario and America's war on terrorism. Mourning and melancholia are the symptoms of traumatic displacement displayed by the characters in these novels and "how an endless process of diasporic nostalgia and mourning interacts with immigrants' efforts to deal with different others" (p.57). Based upon Freud's concept of mourning as an experience of transformation, she believes that since trauma is an intricate process and affects every individual in different manner, there are some characters who submit to transformation.

In her article *Kamila Shamsie's Novel Burnt Shadow: A Discourse of Traumatic displacement* (2015) Asma Zahoor examines Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* as discourse of trauma displacement through the lens of Fairclough's critical discourse analysis. Displacement and trauma are major themes portrayed in the novel and the story recalls a series of traumatic displacements of Pakistani prisoners as a result of three historical events; the atomic bombing at Nagasaki, partition of India and Pakistan, and September 11 attack on WTC.

Seyedeh Robabeh et al (2017) in *Women and Psychological trauma of 9/11 in Amy Waldman's The Submission*, explores the psychological trauma of 9/11 and PTSD on female characters. The three female characters Claire Burwell, Asma Anwar and Eileen Gallagher belong to different socio-cultural and circumstantial backgrounds and are psychologically traumatized. Their lives are shattered in the aftermath of 9/11 through the loss of their loved ones but instead of succumbing to cruel fate, they struggle and rise. It is their personal resistance that contributes to the anticlimactic denouement of the story; "Waldman's novel does not only portray the trauma of the characters but also presents the path of recovery and overcoming the PTSD of those who were emotionally wounded by the tragedy of 9/11" (p.49).

3. Traumatic Healing in Saffron Dreams

Shaila Abdullah structures her novel around the unforgettable incident of 9/11 and the destruction caused by it to humanity. The terrorist attack on WTC proved to be a historical and defining event in the world's history and the aftershocks are manifold. Numberless people lost their lives on the tragic morning of September 11, 2001. Some people lost their loved ones, some wanted revenge from those who were involved – or thought to be responsible – in that inhumane act, and there were some people who became victims of both atrocities since they not only had to suffer the separation of their blood relatives but were also victimized by the vengeance that characterized the aftermath of the attacks. After having lost her husband on the morning of 9/11, Arissa – the protagonist of the novel – is abreast with psychological trauma. The intense sorrow caused by the death of her husband, her handicapped son and the crisis of being a Muslim immigrant in the US after the terrorist attack of 9/11 stimulated traumatic inner struggle that in turn led to Arissa's self-transformation. Arissa's struggle with post trauma is unique and self-explanatory. In the beginning she is so heartbroken that she decides to commit suicide when she hears about the suicide of a woman victim who lost her husband in the terrorist attack. Her healing process begins when she decides to live her life with her disabled son and complete her husband's unfinished novel.

There is a marked difference between pre and post 9/11 scenarios: Pre 9/11 era was easy to bear for immigrants particularly for Muslims: they were not suspected though they were thought to be different. 9/11 drew a line dividing Muslims from Non-Muslim Westerners and by creating an environment of wariness and suspicion. The West's hatred and prejudice against Muslims extended to the creation of a wide gulf between the occident and the orient. Muslims were blamed for disturbing peace and harmony and perceived as extremists, terrorists and aggressive. The binary relationship between the occident and the orient – positive and negative, civilized and uncivilized – is deepened in the wake of 9/11. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) has called this binary opposition of

the Orient against the Occident a Western constructed hegemonic stance that is wholly based on the occident's 'cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other' (p. 4). The post 9/11 period marks an identity crisis for Muslims; the stereotyping of Muslims as fundamentalist and aggressive brought Muslims from the center to the periphery and most Muslim immigrants tried to camouflage their identities under the guise of American identity. Shaila Abdullah marks the identity crisis of those dreadful days in these words;

After the first list of hijackers' names and nationalities was published, many Arabs and Asian immigrants put up American flags on cars and shops, sign of solidarity laced with the hope of evading discrimination. It was a desperate attempt to show loyalty to a nation under attack (p.40).

Likewise, some immigrants – trying to avoid suspicion – were forced to give up their cultural and religious bonds in an attempt to assimilate into a society where their identities were being looked down upon. Hijab, particularly, became a sign of violence and association with terrorism. It was considered a “symbol of oppression and violence of Islamic beliefs” (Zieger, 2008: p.278). The women who wore hijab were treated differently and abusively, since the media also associated the veil with the enemy (Droogsma, 2007: p.308). Arissa recalls;

Some women took down their hijabs, afraid of being targeted, and adopted to a conservative but Western style of dressing. Men cut their beard. Many postponed plans to visit the country of their origin any time soon. Those who did travel preferred to remain quiet during their journey and chose not to converse in their native language even among family members. A few close friends changed their names – Salim became Sam, Ali converted to Alan – in an attempt to hide identities, when asked their nationalities, they offered evasive answers. (p.41)

Arissa also becomes a victim of the racial hatred of non-Muslim Americans since the American society was full of discrimination and inequalities post 9/11. The immigrants, especially Muslims were victims of racial stereotyping and the biasedness and racist attitude of non-Muslim Americans towards Muslims and Islam made conditions harder for them since they felt vulnerable as immigrants and particularly Muslims immigrants. Arissa suffers from discrimination in the wake of 9/11. Sometimes she is reminded of her association with Islam and terrorism by the violent reactions of non-Muslim Americans and sometimes she is ironically sympathized with for being attacked by the people of her own race. She listens to the news and talk-shows where the topic discussed is invariably Islam and terrorism, with Islam being associated with and at times even held synonymous with violence.

Since trauma involves the process of breaking off association between individual and its community, recovery requires re-establishing a sense of community. Arissa's recovery process starts when she starts a job in the Asian magazine Chamak as associate editor. This job provides her the opportunity to develop social connections and lessen the threats of isolation. For an individual, the social and cultural context is very important for developing personal and social identity. Individuals are not isolated from society, they are understood in relation to others and society. Society structures our thoughts and

behaviour; we act in accordance with social norms, values and ideologies. Therefore identities are not stable or complete but dynamic in the process of reshaping and restructuring. Diaspora is a process of social dislocation which brings identity into different social structures and reshapes it. Stuart Hall talks about diasporic identity that flows and constructs anew. He believes that identity is a process of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. Thus identity is marked by the acceptance of discontinuity and heterogeneity along with the presence of the present and the past. Diaspora identity is "defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity ... Hybridity" (p.235). Thus diaspora identities, in-relation to cultural identity, are "those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (Hall, 1996: p. 235).

Arissa was able to heal and take charge of life after the traumatic encounter mainly due to the love and care of her in-laws who continued with her until she was ready to move ahead. The consistent care and counseling of her mother in-law and father in-law infuses a new spirit in her. Her mother in-law is the embodiment of traditional parenthood and enforcer of Pakistani cultural practices. She is capable of embedding cultural values in Arissa's personality which brings optimism and determination; and Arissa intends to live meaningful life. She soothes her against all what has happened and encourages her to fight back against atrocity of life, Arissa remembers "Ma came to me in each morning with a cup of steaming tea and helped me sit up, forcing me to face the new day. She smelled of soap and water, fresh like spring. She would draw the curtain and sit next to me and encourage me to talk" (p.57). Although Ma and Baba are also mourning the death of their son, they try to hide it and pretend immunity to the loss; "throughout their son's death and afterward, they held each other through the waves of sadness and the ripples of lost hope that crashed against the giant rocks of desperation and made it ashore – always together, generously passing on that gift to me" (p.59). Arissa understands their psychological state through the wrinkles on their faces, "in many ways I saw similarities in the structure of Ma's face and Baba's face, perhaps a product of going through similar life event that left wrinkles and lines at the exact same times on their beings, (p.57). Arissa's mother in-law plays a vital role in Arissa's healing and recovery process, "she had cried many nights by herself but always woke up with a vow in her heart to be a healing balm to others around her" (p.71).

Disgusted by the treatment she receives after the fall of WTC, Arissa decides to move on in life. When she does move on, she faces different hurdles in her way related to her cultural, religious and gender identity. She is a veil-wearing woman but her veil is not acceptable in a society overflowing with racial hatred. She is Muslim but Islam is a question mark in the West being associated with the religion of terrorists; supposed to teach violence and terrorism. She attempts to avoid being stereotyped in the host society and decides to forego her cultural traditions in order to be accepted. She takes off her veil and adapts to the Western style. Leaving her veil allows her to cross her cultural barriers; she starts working in a newspaper company, and develops relations with a man. Her perception of the self is reflected through social identity formation. It is society that gives her the sense of identity when she interacts with society and the social constructs that allow her to define her self-image in relation to people and society. She negotiates her cultural and religious identity by crossing the barriers of her traditional Muslim world to the nontraditional secular world of America. The distance from the traditional world

allows her to reconsider her gender and social roles and free herself from the clutches of her traditions. When she takes off her veil for the first time, “the wind tore the veil from my hand, making my task easier” (p.4), and it is thus that she bids farewell to ‘the age-old tradition’ (p.4).

Trauma causes identity disruption in consequence of traumatic experience and/or identity crisis and people naturally look for outside assistance but some people may look inward for help. Both outer and inner reliance collectively contribute to the healing process. Since identity is a process of social structuring of an individual against social relations or internalization of dominant social norms and values, Arissa develops her self-perception in relation to discursive social practices. The prevalent social situations provide her a basis to define her identity. Since identity is not a static phenomenon; with ever changing social structures, the perception of identity as either individual or collective undergoes transition in a specific social order. Lacan (1949) articulates that the function of imaginary or the mirror phase “is to establish a relationship between the organism and its reality – or, between the Innennwelt and the Umwelt” (p.289). Lacan also states that identity is a socio-psychological process of becoming a subject and with this in mind he establishes interactional relation between inner and outer worlds for human entrance into society. In order to locate her self-identity in relation to social reality, Arissa feels that her position has become unacceptable in America after 9/11. Her experiences of discrimination lead to alienation, anxiety and frustration. Her inner self collides with outer society; she wants to sustain her old traditions but society demands negotiation so far as her social reality is concerned.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that the novel *Saffron Dreams* is not only a description of the traumatic encounters of female immigrants but also a commentary on the importance of self-reflection and self-realization in post-traumatic distress through social identity formation. Arissa struggles to attain her self-consciousness in adverse circumstances with society and social upheavals playing an integral part in her identity formation. She experiences various situations and interacts with different characters. Her identity is shaped by her decisions in relation to society; she adopts what she considers important and discards what is insignificant. She does not collapse amidst the violence of 9/11 but rather gains strength from it. Trauma is believed to have lasting impact of misery on the psyche of the survivors but Abdullah’s protagonist continues struggling to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder.

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