

## **Trauma, Identity, and Narrative in fiction: A Critique of *The Blind Man's Garden* as Trauma Fiction**

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### **Abstract**

*Trauma relates to the pain that brings violent rupture in the individuals as well as social life of people and leads to collective trauma. The relation between trauma and fiction can be traced in various ways (Whitehead, 2004). The study aims to explore how the theme of trauma is incorporated in a narrative. For this purpose, The Blind Man's Garden by Nadeem Aslam is selected as a fictional base, and Trauma Fiction by Ann Whitehead (2004) is used as a tool to analyze the emotional condition and trauma of Pakistani natives after the war on terror. This study is essentially qualitative and placed within the interpretive paradigm. Twenty passages have been selected from the selected fiction as textual data through non-random sampling techniques. Findings of the study revealed that themes in the selected novel convey the trauma of Pakistani society by using powerful language techniques most effectively. It is also revealed that painful events are embedded in the mind of the individuals thus transforming them into traumatic beings. Resultantly, the individual trauma leads towards the trauma of society as a whole. The study urges future researchers to explore other narratives highlighting the cultural, social, and gender trauma of Pakistani society.*

**Keywords:** Individual Trauma, Painful Events, Pakistani Society, Pakistani Natives, Trauma Fiction, Trauma, Traumatic Beings, War on Terror

### **Introduction**

Trauma is fundamentally an experience that raptures violently the social, psychological, and individual lives of the people. After the attacks of 9/11, American-led counter-terrorism was started against Muslims. Media and Literature also represented Muslims as the enemy of Americans therefore Americans had a prejudiced notion about them. When American forces invaded Afghanistan, which shares a border with Pakistan, the already distressed and war-struck people there faced severe mental trauma. This invasion also had negative effects on Pakistan. The trauma, violence, and destruction that was initially poured on Americans and then was transferred to Afghans, relocated to Pakistani people. These nations were collectively affected by the devastations of war, but they were unaware of each other's problems. Caruth (1995) asserted that if trauma can be represented in narration, then it should be displayed in literary form. In modern writing, there is plenty of fiction that represents the stories of traumatized people. This type of fiction portrays the truths of victims to those who did not experience the actual incidents. After 9/11 many writers tried to present the trauma of people who were affected by the attacks. Schwartz (2002) adverts the consequences of trauma in her stories about the attacks of 9/11. She inscribed the helplessness of writers of that era. According to her, the writers, after 9/11, were so ruthless that they were unable to write anything about the event. Muslim writers, including Pakistani and Afghan writers; Kureshi, Rahimi, Rushdie, Naqvi, Hosseini, Hamid, and Aslam, wrote a lot about the attacks of 9/11. Afghan writers published several reports to present the trauma of Afghani people who were mentally distressed by the three-decades-long war. Physical and psychological side effects of the war on Afghans are given in a report by Jackson (2012). He claimed in his report that out of three Afghans, every two are suffering from mental distress.

By the same token Pakistani scholars studied Pakistanis' trauma who faced severe mental distresses while facilitating the Afghans. These authors tried to express survivors' feelings and the incidences of trauma universally by reviewing this trauma. The economic, social, and political effects of war on

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terror in Pakistan are studied by Khan (2013). He stated in his study that Pakistan had paid a massive price against the unending war on terrorism. Not only was Pakistan's image built up as a terrorist state, but its people were also ruined both physically and mentally. Along with infrastructural and economic damages, Pakistan has even met psychological wounds as well. According to Abbasi (2013), terrorism has become a central danger to the safety of Pakistan. She claimed that in the future, the people of the country would face adverse effects. She also highlighted the psychological damage that people will bear. She contended that continuous wars lead to psychological and mental injuries. This study is set to explore how Pakistani natives' mental distress in the setting of the War on Terror is represented in fiction. For this purpose, *Aslam's The Blind Man's Garden (TBMG) 2013* serves as the best fictional representation, depicting characters traumatized by the prevailing terror and suffering from mental stress. Their life trajectories when closely examined reveal them to be traumatized individuals.

The study uses Whitehead's theory on trauma fiction to dissect the nominated fictional work to provide probable answers for the following questions.

1. How did the war on terror affect the psychology and mental condition of Pakistani natives?
2. What features of trauma fiction can be traced in *The Blind Man's Garden*?

### **Literature Review**

Caruth (1995) is a pioneer of literary trauma theory and considered trauma as an incident that remains in the mind of the victim but cannot be expressed in words. It damages the mental health of the victim, conclusively fragments identity. The victim's shocked mind rejects understanding the situation; thus, he became unable to express his condition in words. But the fear keeps on haunting the victim, and this presence of trauma disrupts both identity and language. Caruth (1996) states that trauma is an injury that reveals itself by portraying unknown truths. According to her, both trauma and literature, have the same purpose: they are concerned with a person's mind.

Vickroy (2002) explains trauma texts as testimonials represent the history and recover forgotten memories. They help politically and socially suppressed people who cannot represent themselves in public discourse, for instance, autobiographies of the survivors. She also argues that contemporary fictional trauma narratives are a representation of traumas of war, poverty, slavery, colonization, and domestic violence.

While listing elements of trauma fiction, Whitehead (2004) asserts that trauma can be presented in the literature by following certain narrative techniques. In *Trauma Fiction*, she explains the vital characteristics of a trauma narrative. She claimed that trauma narrative is not concerned merely with the reminiscences of painful, stressful, and disturbing happenings; it is concerned with the way trauma is conveyed and the explanations that help in its remembrance. She argues about trauma fiction's techniques that how trauma fiction is written, and how it affects its readers. She gave several narrative methods in trauma fiction and helped it become a great tool to convey traumatic happenings. Intertextuality, repetition, memory places, fantastic, a hovering voice in narrative, and choiceless choices are the main narrative techniques used in her text to convey the meaning of trauma fiction. Baelo-Allue (2012) distinguished two types of trauma novels: "psychic trauma novels that capture the effect of suffering on the mind of the individual and cultural trauma novels that focus on the social and cultural consequences of the events". She claimed that trauma fiction, like that of some postcolonial narratives, makes use of experimental forms as a medium for communicating the unreality of trauma, while remaining faithful to the facts of history. In her article on 9/11 novels, she argues that "Psychic trauma is anti-narrative since victims cannot put into words what they experienced".

Thus, some writers sought ways to represent the experience through experimental literary techniques and the introduction of images to capture the horror of the traumatic experience without simplifying it. She also argues that the "literary techniques that tend to recur in trauma narratives mirror, at a formal level, the effects of trauma and include intertextuality, repetition, and fragmentation". Arizti (2011) agrees with Baelo-Allue and stresses that repetition concerning language, imagery, or plot is one of the most common strategies for translating trauma into the narrative. Thus, there is a great variety of techniques and means of representing a traumatic experience that authors of trauma fiction use to convey trauma. Baelo-Allue (2012) distinguished psychic trauma novels from cultural trauma novels. According to her psychic trauma novels are the novels that incarcerate the influence of pain on the mind of the individual and cultural trauma novels are novels that focus on the social and cultural consequences of the events. According to her trauma

fiction also helps in preserving history and for this purpose uses many new techniques to exhibit the trauma in novels particularly in postcolonial narratives. As victims cannot describe their experiences in words so writers try to find different ways to portray their traumas by using different literary techniques which describe facts without exaggerating things. She argues that different literary techniques like repetition, intertextuality, and fragmentation are used in trauma fiction to create the same traumatic effect as in reality.

Arizti (2011) is also of the same opinion and agrees that repetition of imagery and plot as a literary technique is the most useful technique to write trauma in fiction. Thus, this variation in techniques is used by the writers to portray trauma effectively in a narrative. Along with writing techniques of trauma fiction, there are plenty of works that portray the traumas of societies. Inayat Ullah (2016) analyzed the trauma of Afghans after the global wars on terror were imposed on them. In this study, he studied two great novels, *The Kite Runners* and *Earth and Ashes* by Pakistani fiction writers Hosseini and Rahimi. In his study, he used different literary trauma theories to analyze the trauma of characters. His study sketches the historical description of Afghani people, who were dealing with distressing situations during the war. In his study, he highlights the way fiction talks about the history that is documented in the minds of traumatized individuals without any modification. He used Caruth's literary trauma theory from *Literature in the Ashes of History* (2013) to support his study and concludes that traumatized individuals help in knowing about the past and in augmenting history.

Mehboob (2016) investigated a fictional narrative, *The Scatter Here is too great* by Tanweer. She analyzed this narrative in the context of trauma fiction. In this study, she tries to present the trauma and survival of traumatic beings from both individual and collective perspectives. For this purpose, she uses Caruth and Erikson's traumatic approaches and reflects upon the importance of literature in healing and surviving from trauma. Sultan and Zafar (2016) conducted a study to find out the literature published in Pakistan on the subject of trauma. After this purely quantitative study, they came to there is a massive room in Pakistan for trauma studies and concluded that trauma literature in Pakistan significantly lacks in quantity. From their study, researchers came to know that trauma is a significant cause of death in Pakistan, people here are facing severe traumas in different situations and shapes, but the quantity of literature that can represent the actual conditions is not sufficient and can be improved. Shakoor and Sadia (2016) analyzed the trauma of Kashmiri people who are oppressed by the tyranny of the Indian Government. They highlighted the existential trauma of these people by using the fictional narrative of Mirza Waheed, *The Collaborator*. In this study, they applied traumatic narratology and techniques of desensitization to analyze the trauma of the hopeless and depressed Kashmiri nation qualitatively. Jones and Caruth's trauma frameworks are applied in this study to highlight the existential dilemma and trauma in the narrative. Hanif and Inayat Ullah (2018) also analyzed the same piece of fiction, *The Collaborators* for cultural trauma and the collective identity of Kashmiris. They highlighted that the trauma represented in this fictional account of the Kashmiri community is the same as the trauma experienced in the global north. The researchers have used Alexander's cultural trauma theory and Erikson's collective trauma theory to present the trauma of the Kashmiri community.

Shahbaz and Rashid (2020) analyzed the traumatic experiences of a little girl in Brown's fictional narrative, *Drinking from a Bitter Cup*. This study highlights the situational and social trauma of a little girl and also analyses her traumatic experiences. By using Salmons and Vickory's theoretical models of trauma, this study conducts a textual analysis of selected fiction and explores trauma generated from deaths of loved ones and sexual abuse. The study highlights the burning issue of sexual abuse of children and proves that children who suffer such abuses are more prone to mental disorders. Through this study, readers also came to know about the individual traumas that people suffer from in various situations. Shahbaz, Khushi, and Muhammad (2020) highlight the trauma of a transgender woman in their study, *Exploring Social and Situational Transgender Trauma in Roy's The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The transgender community is the most neglected community that suffers a great deal of discrimination and traumatic violence. In this study, they used Vickory's trauma theory to highlight the sacrifices that a transgender character faces in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. This study proves that unfair standards of society are not what makes an individual a standard person in society, but to be humane is what matters. This study explores the situational and social trauma Anju faces due to the double standards of society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Whitehead (2004) elaborated her concept of trauma fiction against the notion of trauma as an experience that makes an individual speechless. She argued that trauma can be justly presented when it is narrativized in fiction. She claimed that while writing trauma fiction certain techniques can be consciously incorporated into the fiction to make it a trauma fiction. The narrative techniques that she mainly focused on are choiceless choice, memory places, repetition, fantastic, narrative voice, and intertextuality in the text. By choiceless choice, Whitehead (2004) means that characters in trauma fiction have to make choices that are not in their control. They have to choose between two evils. These choices later become the reason for traumatic incidents and haunt the sufferer throughout their life. Fantastic is another narrative technique in trauma fiction explained by Whitehead (2004), by which she means that traumatic characters in a novel are unable to differentiate between reality and imagination. A traumatic being delves into the trauma so much that it makes him unable to live in the reality and he starts to confuse reality with his imagination creating another symptom of trauma. Whitehead also argued that certain places in a traumatic fiction act as memory places and a traumatic individual associates an event of a trauma with certain places, whenever he visits that place, he starts to have flashbacks of that events so strongly that it becomes hard for him to function as a normal human being.

By repetition Whitehead (2004) means that in trauma fiction certain images are repeated in the form of flashbacks and memory. By repeating these images traumatic events are repeatedly presented that became the reason for the trauma of an individual. These repeated images are presented in the plot, language, and also in imagery to create a gripping effect of trauma in the fiction as it is still present. This repetition directly changes the narration and makes a fragmented and dispersed narrative voice. Whitehead (2004) explained this dispersed voice also as a narrative technique. By using fragmented voice writer narrates the traumatic experience of individuals and creates the effect of trauma in fiction. Another powerful technique that Whitehead (2004) focused on is intertextuality. In trauma fiction, intertextuality does not mean external references from other texts and writers, it means references from the past in the form of memory and flashbacks. This intertextuality in trauma fiction brings symptoms of trauma in an individual and expresses the events that create the trauma.

### **Research Methodology**

This is a qualitative study that uses the interpretivism approach to conduct a textual analysis of *The Blind Man's Garden* to prove it a trauma fiction and to trace the effects of 9/11 on Pakistani natives. Twenty paragraphs from the text are chosen through purposive sampling.

### **Analysis of *The Blind Man's Garden***

In *The Blind Man's Garden*, Aslam highlights the condition after 9/11, in which all Muslims were considered terrorists by the western people. Aslam's fiction *The Blind Man's Garden* echoes Pakistani Muslims' condition who were bearing the United States' cruelty and for the sin, they never committed. Aslam's fictional creation reflects the harsh reality that Muslims living abroad are being victimized and traumatized by the war on terror and their traumatic experiences are hugely detrimental to their mental and emotional well-being. The novel under focus is full of repetitions, imagery, intertextuality which highlights that Muslims who have no relation to terrorism, suffered a great deal of trauma and distress. The novel is full of such events and techniques which can prove it a trauma fiction.

### **Choiceless choice**

Mikal and Rohan are the central characters of the novel. There are plenty of choices in the novel made by these characters that were not their intentional decisions but were their choiceless choices. Mikal, Rohan's foster son, was kidnapped by Americans. When he got liberated from the prison after investigations, two Americans were with him. While moving towards the Mosque, they were standing behind him. He smelled sulfur which clicked in his mind the smell of bullets. Quickly, he decided and picked up the pistol from the American soldier's hip holster and killed him. He fired two shots, one in the American Soldier's neck and the second in the chest. He was also shocked by his choiceless decision.

“...amazed at the freedom of movement in his unchained arms, amazed that his incomplete hands are now allowing him to place the pistol directly against the man's throat and effortlessly pull the trigger.” (TBMG)

These words show that Mikal did not want to shoot the soldiers as he was amazed at his act. This decision was not his intentional choice. He then turned to the second American and again fired

two bullets. One bullet entered from his wrist and passed his arm, and the other is pushed in his face. Mikal also killed the second soldier. Both these murders were unintentional. He killed the soldiers to save his life. He had two choices, either he could die or kill them. Both options were immoral, so he chose the one that was less terrible for him. However, the repercussions of this random aggression, taken in self-defense, are far-reaching and manifests forcefully leading to his endless imprisonment.

### **Memory Places**

In the novel, many places made the characters think about their past. Rohan, the head of the house and the blind man of the novel, went to Peshawar to search for his missing son, Joe. Joe lied to his family that he is going to Peshawar, but he went to Afghanistan. He was studying medicine, a wanted to help Muslims during WOT. On the other hand, Joe's dead body reached there before the arrival of Rohan. He entered the house and started visiting the garden. He examined the trees, the bird catching wires, and flowers. He noticed that the bird traps were no longer there which filled him with relief, symbolically highlighting his desire for liberation and the presence of stress and trauma on his mind. He started examining the garden deeply and found that some of the branches of trees were broken. He inspected the wounds, which were not fresh and seemed to have occurred yesterday. These broken trees provide a symbolic link between the traumatic events and Joe's death.

Mikal also seemed to be the person who was severely traumatized by the memory of places. Upon returning from the prison, he went to the house in the night. He climbed the boundary wall and recalled his past. He used to come back late in the night after watching movies and climbed the wall in the same manner. The wall, the corridors, Rohan's room, and Joe's room, all these places are memory places for Mikal that contributed to the trauma of the narrative, thus revealing the traumatic narrative of the novel.

### **Repetition**

Repetition is another main element of trauma fiction. In this novel, many events are repeated several times in the form of memories. Yasmin, Rohan's daughter, is sitting with closed eyes and her hands on her belly. She is thinking about his child's dead father, Basie. Sometimes Yasmin forgets that he is dead and turns around to talk with him, which shows he is still alive in her memories. Terrorists shot eighty-six bullets in the body of Basie. For Yasmin, each shot in his body symbolized the death of shared memory with Basie. All these memories are presented in the text as the repetition of Basie's doings. She recalls his reactions when someone called him cleric due to his beard. He made them clear it is the beard inspired by Castro and Mikal. She remembered that he did not even know how to offer prayers, follow people praying next to him, and recollect his love for walking on the dew-covered grass. Reflecting the way of sitting, talking, joking, loving, reading, arguing, impersonating and worrying, depicts the traumatized condition of Yasmin as proposed by Whitehead.

### **Fantastic**

Characters of this novel seem to struggle throughout the novel while differentiating between reality and imagination. In the concluding paragraph of this selected fiction, Naheed, Joe's widow sitting near the garden gate, reads a book. Suddenly, the gate opens, and Naheed sees Mikal. "Perhaps it is his ghost." This condition of Naheed shows that she has lost her sense of differentiating between real and illusionary. She sees Mikal, who is not there in reality. She starts walking towards him. Perhaps the ghost of Mikal was assuring her to live his life without him. Her real life was affected by these anxious thoughts; she continues to see his images around her. These episodes sever her link with reality as she gets overwhelmed by these appearances and begins to follow them as being drawn or pulled by them. The sounds of insects in the background show a dark and gloomy state of Naheed, which is now a part of her traumatic being. Naheed's character is shown here as a traumatic person, having no control over her body. She saw illusions of the person which is the reason for her ache and continues longing for him. Whitehead (2004) called this notion "Fantastic," which means the victim cannot separate reality and imaginings in a traumatic narration. The case of Naheed here is just like this, where she seems unconscious of her surroundings.

### **Discussion**

The concept of trauma fiction was proposed by Whitehead (2004). According to her, characters in a trauma narrative suffer from their choiceless choices and make appalling decisions. Characters make such decisions because they do not have options. The result of these decisions adds to the traumatic condition of the characters. In the selected piece of fiction, several characters suffered from the traumatic effects of their choiceless choices. The passage analyzed in this study about the choiceless

choice of Mikal also proved this text a trauma narrative where Mikal is the victim of such unintentional decisions. He killed two American soldiers to save his life.

In 'Trauma Fiction' (2004), Whitehead asserts a relationship between landscapes and memory in trauma fiction. According to her, particular places from the past of characters haunt them and repetitively come to their memory and become memory places. These places linked the characters with the trauma and developed a connection between them, so whenever the character visit that memory place, it brings the memory of trauma in his mind. In *The Blind Man's Garden*, many locations like the garden, Ardent Spirit, and the Christian school show association with the characters' trauma. Almost all the main characters of the novel have their memories of the garden in Rohan's house. Even the novel's opening is in the garden where Rohan is delved deep into his past traumas. Mikal and Naheed's Secrets are buried in the garden, which came back to haunt them whenever they visited it. Rohan's meeting with the pardoner is also a memory in Garden. Rohan, when he came back from Peshawar, before knowing about his son's death, saw the damages in the garden. This situation indicates that the garden is connected with the house residents, particularly Rohan, and acts as a memory place for them.

This text has the repetition of many memories. Whitehead (2004) states duplication of the images in trauma novels as memories of characters is an integral part of trauma narratives. Yasmin remembers his husband and thinks about the little things he did in his routine life. In her memory, she recollects his actions, which causes repetition of incidents in the text, proving the novel, a trauma fiction.

The second part of Whitehead' Trauma Fiction (2004) is 'Style,' in which she stated that a traumatic individual in the fiction is a person who faced a massive amount of shock, and this blow of shock leads to the frozen moment where he became unable to function and lose the sense of happenings around him. This concept of the paralyzed moment is termed as Fantastic in her book. It means the victim became unable to separate reality from imagination in a traumatic narrative. Naheed seems unaware of her surroundings many times in the novel. She sometimes saw Mikal, who, in fact, is nowhere near her. In the last passage, Naheed is standing in the garden imagining and talking with Mikal, which is another element of trauma fiction, as the ending of the novel is precisely the conclusion of a trauma fiction, described by Lacapra (2001). According to him, the essential feature of trauma fiction is that its ending cannot be predicted, defying closure. At the end of this novel, Naheed is in a state of yearning. After Mikal vanishes, she cannot manage to live without him. This ending defies her closure. She aches for Mikal in the same way when he was in Americans' custody, and every person was telling her he is not anymore. Naheed and Mikal's story flouts the novel's conclusion, leaving all characters in constant ache and distress.

After analyzing, the text under study is found as a pure trauma narrative, having all narrative techniques stated by Whitehead (2004) in Trauma Fiction.

### **Conclusion**

According to Whitehead's theory (2004), the trauma writings are usually not structured according to set patterns and mostly have abrupt starts and ends. Repetition of images and loosely created beginnings and endings are the inherent features of such fiction, as exhibited by the chosen novel for this study. The repetition of images and visions coupled with the loosely knitted plot makes the reader curious and aware of the trauma, stress, ambiguity, and fear that the characters are feeling. It also raises various questions in the minds of the readers. (Whitehead, 2004). Aslam followed the same pattern in his novel as he did not observe any direct pattern; instead, the opening, ending, and midpoint of the novel is not linear, and the story kept progressing with the help of memories and recollections of its characters, which ultimately results in the repetition of numerous events and finally in the trauma of characters.

Whitehead (2004) stated that trauma narrative has numerous techniques containing fantastic, repetition, memory places, hovering voice, choiceless choice. The characteristics of trauma fiction stated in Whitehead's study are all there in *The Blind Man's Garden*. The traumatic individuals of the novel have hallucinations of different memories which creates repetition. Naheed and Rohan's flashbacks are recurring, making repetition in the text. The places mentioned in the selected novel are also crucial in evidencing the fiction as a trauma fiction as they play their role as memory places, contributing to characters' trauma. Major characters' choiceless choices make the novel a pure trauma narrative, where the characters made numerous choices unintentionally. Rohan went to Peshawar with

the bird pardoner and then returned blind while helping prisoners there; Naheed went to find Mikal without anyone knowing; Mikal's murdering of two American soldiers are the choiceless decisions that turned out to be the novel's unintentional choices of traumatic characters, consequently making the novel a trauma narrative.

### Future Implications and Suggestions

The selected novel, *Blind Man's Garden* can be claimed as the resisting discourse through raising voice to the muted groups of the society, questioning the intentions of superpower and exploring the reasons and life -long impacts of trauma on individuals.

This study encourages future researchers to explore English Literature in Pakistan from various perspectives. Edward Said's neo-orientalism can be applied to *The Blind Man's Garden* to inspect the stereotypical Muslims formed by the western power structures. Cultural and economic impacts of war on terror can be observed by applying the theories of Spivak and Bhabha. Researchers can inspect different types of traumas in other fictional pieces. Muhammad Hanif's *Red Birds* (2018) can be marked out to trace traumatic instances in the lives of refugees and the people affected by the war on terrorism in this novel. Cultural and gender trauma of Pakistani women can be traced in Nafisa Haji's *The Sweetness of tears* (2011). Pakistani researchers can inspect the Urdu Literature to examine the traces of literary trauma theory. Qudratullah Shahab's "*Khuda Kay Liye*" can be traced for the trauma of partition, which tells the story of subcontinent's females living a life of misery after the Indo-Pak partition.

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