



Enigma of Colonial Amnesia and the Trauma of the Past in Fatimah Asghar's Finding the Hammam

Farheen Shakir¹, Inayat Ullah²

Keywords:

Fatimah Asghar,
Finding the Hammam,
Postcolonial Memory,
Trauma

Trauma studies in the literature is an area of the main focus in twenty-first century, in the wake of postcolonial memories and the imperial projects of the Western world. The atrocities of the past events create the gap in the memory and cause the trauma. The current study endeavours to trace the trauma of the memory in the main character of Fatimah Asghar's prose work Finding the Hammam. The comic representation of the realistic event happening in her autobiographical work describes the trauma she faces as the memory of her colonial and postcolonial pasts that haunt her present. Asghar describes the pain she feels when she recalls her old days in the postcolonial world. The current paper deals with the enigmatic representation of the dilemma, in Asghar's works, of the amnesia of the colonial memory and the trauma created by the same past. For the current study, the theoretical support of Cathy Caruth's concepts related to Trauma in her book Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History (1996) and Leela Gandhi's Postcolonial Theory (1998) have been selected to analyse the sample prose work. The study explores the colonial past as the main traumatic base that creates the postcolonial design and later creates the traumatic memory for Fatimah Asghar. For the current study, the method of reading autobiography proposed by Sedonie Smith has been used in which she considers finding the genuine status of the memory by focusing on the agency, memory, experience, and personal traumatic events in her methodology of dealing with the memoir and autobiography. While, Asghar blames the postcolonial world as the cause of her trauma which is her amnesia of the colonial past in reality.

INTRODUCTION

¹MPhil English Literature, Department of English (Graduate Studies, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: farheenshakir@gmail.com

²Department of English (Graduate Studies, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: inayat@numl.edu.pk

The memory and the resultant stress are the acknowledged problems which are connected to each other in the twenty-first century's postmodern world especially in the postcolonial part of the world. The current study is mainly focused on Asghar's memory of belonging to the contemporary time and the trauma she has experienced as the diaspora in a foreign country. The memory of the past and its impact on the mental condition is important as it designs their present and future actions simultaneously. The sufferings in the traumatic experience and its recalling make her life miserable which is presented as colonial aporia in the current study.

The study is designed to reveal the forgotten colonial past in amnesia, presented side by side with the painful memory of the past causing trauma which needs to be recalled to end the trauma. The same treatment of trauma actually gives way to the enigma of forgetting the colonial past. Considering the argument that the same memory which reveals the colonial past also causes trauma in the future because of the personal self-effacement in the consequence, it highlights the treatment as the main reason behind bringing back the postcolonial limbo and colonial amnesia.

Fatimah Asghar is the renowned American Poet whose poems have been published by poetry foundation on its website. Her prose work *Finding the Hammam* (2019) is also published by the poetry foundation which presents her lived experiences. According to Poetry Foundation, Fatimah Asghar belongs to Kashmir and is recently living in America as an expat. Her works include Brown Girls web series, poetry books, *After* (2015), and *If you come for Us* (2018).

Fatimah Asghar's *Finding the Hammam* (2019) is an autobiographical account, published by Poetry Foundation. The prose is about Fatimah Asghar's past experience of schooling in Jordan where she is sexually harassed by her school mate boys. She finds a salon as a peaceful place where only women are allowed. There is no man to threaten their existence or integrity of the self. She describes her friendship with the haram aunties who talk about all the taboo topics openly in the hammam without any fear. She feels comfortable with those haram aunties than her own parents. Later, the arrival of an electrician man in the hammam makes all women uneasy and create nervousness. They all run to cover them until the only man in the women-only hammam vacates the place. Fatimah Asghar describes Muslim women's phobia of men as engrained in their personalities. Nonetheless, she does not feel herself secured outside her house without a mahram man with her that illustrates the horrific picture of sexual violence as the prevalent act among the citizens of postcolonial countries.

The current study is designed to explore the paradoxical positioning of the colonial amnesia and the trauma of the postcolonial past by using the theoretical support of Cathy Caruth's concepts about Trauma and Leela Gandhi's philosophical underpinnings about postcolonial theory in the sample prose work *Finding the Hammam* (2019) by Fatimah Asghar. Focusing on the problem of exile and the traumatic past as the key factors to be evaluated in this study. The argument hinges on the fact that the traumatic memory disturbs the daily routine of the subjects especially when the subject belongs to the postcolonial world where the past portrays the memory of the colonial bounds and suppression. The current study deals with the problem how the memory of the past in the wake of postcolonial world leads to the trauma of the subject who is displaced from her roots and faces exile as diaspora on the foreign land to cure her trauma. But the fading or curing project of the same memory is also the postcolonial limbo or the loss of the colonial memory of sheer trauma and pain which is the epistemic crime and the colonial amnesia.

The main purpose of the current study is to highlight the individual experience of a postcolonial diaspora woman and the resultant trauma she faces, along with amnesia of the past as the contrasted and bifurcated realities. Since, the research conducted previously on Fatimah Asghar's works do not cover her autobiographical work *Finding the Hammam*, therefore, the current study adds into the knowledge of the trauma faced by a woman who discusses the mindset of brown men in relation to postcolonial background and the colonial bounds. The multiple oppressive forces that target her gender, her past as the postcolonial subject, and her oppressed state without any agency to counter the attack are the main instruments behind her trauma and amnesia of colonial past. She targets more the postcolonial world's men than the colonial agencies.

Fatimah Asghar's works have not been studied with the lens of memory and trauma which makes this study authentic and genuine addition of new dimensions in the study of trauma in postcolonial literary writings of Pakistani diasporic writers and poets. In the current study, I have touched upon the memory of the past related to sexual violence as the major cause behind the traumatic experience and postcolonial limbo. For the purpose of this study, several literary studies researches relevant to the study were explored to locate the gap and examine the selected prose with a new lens. All these researches focus on the trauma related to any past memory in postcolonial studies. The current research is designed to trace the trauma in Fatimah Asghar's autobiographical account *Finding the Hammam* in light of

postcolonial traumatic concepts.

Aims and Objectives

- To identify the memory as the temporal fixity of the diaspora subject in the selected text.
- To distinguish the key factors of trauma and its causing agents in Asghar's autobiographical work in light of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory.
- To excavate the specific memory as a trauma as well as the postcolonial limbo and colonial amnesia, using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Leela Gandhi's postcolonial notions, in Fatimah Asghar's *Finding the Hammam* (2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cathy Caruth (1996) demonstrates Freud's description of trauma that occurs repeatedly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor, against the victim's will (Caruth, 1996, p. 2). Caruth (1996) highlights the view that not only the experience of trauma and its repetition but also the voices which were unheard previously, are heard to make the traumatic experience more subtle and weightier. She has explored and included the direct sight of any violent incident as the main cause leading to the unconscious memory of the event with an absolute inability to understand it (Caruth, 1996, p. 91–2; Andermahr, 2016, p. 13).

Caruth (1996) focuses on the Freudian concept of Trauma which is also elaborated in Psychiatric literature as the wound of the mind (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). According to her, the trauma haunts the memory with the passage of time but not in the first place of the event happening (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). The wounded psyche of the sufferer finds the space for the cries to verbalize the trauma and the reality which is otherwise not available (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Cathy's discussion on referential return of the trauma in Paul de Man's words, insists on the inescapability of its belated impact (Caruth, 1996, p. 7). Cathy enunciates that not only the forgetting of the traumatic memory is the cause of the latency of the memory but also the experience that has become latent (Caruth, 1996, p. 17). She expounds further that leaving the place of traumatic experience makes the memory latent. She explicates Freud's concept of trauma by mentioning, "the trauma of the accident, its very unconsciousness, is borne by an act of departure" (Caruth, 1996, p. 22). The exile or leaving the country or becoming the diaspora or expat support the latency of trauma by suppressing the memory. Caruth (1996) mentions Freud's words, "it forced me to

leave my home, but it also freed me of the fear” (Caruth, 1996, p. 23). However, Judith Herman views the trauma narrative as an empowering and effective therapeutic method in the treatment of trauma victims. She is of the view that studying psychological trauma means coming face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in the human nature. Narratives of trauma, as an “organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical content” (Herman, p. 177), contribute to healing and recovery (Andermahr, 2016, p. 13).

The departure from the postcolonial home and finding a new place as the residence is a source of forgetting the memories of the past and putting them into the unconscious interstices of the brain. The amnesia created after leaving the place is resisted by the haunted memory of the past which, in Leela Gandhi’s words, is “postcolonialism (that) can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 4). Gandhi mentions an anticolonial Tunisian revolutionary intellectual Albert Memmi, “And the day oppression ceases, the new man is supposed to emerge before our eyes immediately” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 6). Gandhi also mentions Albert Memmi’s fears of postcolonial limbo and its pathology between arrival and departure of colonizing powers and the dependence and independence of the nations with residual traces and memories of subordination (Gandhi, 1998, p. 7). Gandhi’s assertion that the description of the term “post” by Lyotard elaborates the concept of breaking with “tradition and institutionalizing the absolutely new ways of living and thinking” (Lyotard, p. 90). “The silences and ellipses of historical amnesia” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 7) lead to such suppression and elimination of the memory from the conscious mind. Hence, Gandhi addresses such rupture of postcolonial amnesia as itself “vulnerable to the infectious residue of its own unconsidered and unresolved past” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 7).

According to Gandhi, the colonial consequences need an “ameliorative and therapeutic theory to deal with the task of remembering and recalling the colonial past what Lyotard describes as the psychoanalytic procedure of anamnesis, or analysis” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 8). Gandhi asserts that it urges patients ‘to elaborate their current problems by freely associating apparently inconsequential details with past situations, allowing them to uncover hidden meanings in their lives and their behaviour’ (Lyotard, p. 93; Gandhi, 1998, p. 8). The ultimate result is the complex project of historical and psychological ‘recovery’ (Gandhi, 1998, p. 8). She mentions Homi K. Bhabha’s assertion in regard of memory of the colonial past that,

Memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity. Remembering, he writes, ‘is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present’ (Bhabha, p. 63; Gandhi, 1998, p. 9).

Bhabha’s stance that the “memory is the submerged and constitutive bedrock of conscious existence” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 9) is the notion which paves the path for the memories which are blocked and banned and become the cause of perambulation of unconscious in a dangerous way (Gandhi, 1998, p. 9). According to Bhabha, such memories need to be released from their captivities to lessen down the offences (Gandhi, 1998, p. 9).

Mentioning the works of both Lacan and Freud, Leela Gandhi states how the repressed memories create a vast reservoir of painful memories,

the deceptions of *Verwerfung* tend to transform the troublesome past into a hostile delirium. The memories and images expelled through the violence of repudiation enter into what Lacan describes as a reciprocal and ‘symbolic opposition to the subject’ (Lacan 1977, p. 217). These phantasmic memories thus become simultaneously alien, antagonistic and unfathomable to the suffering self (Gandhi, 1998, p. 10).

Leela Gandhi also discusses Sara Suleri’s stance on the historical narration and its terrors and errors of the past by mentioning Suleri’s words, “To tell the history of another is to be pressed against the limits of one’s own—thus culture learns that terror has a local habitation and a name’ (Suleri 1992, p. 2)” (Gandhi, 1998, p. 10). Albert Memmi, in Gandhi’s words, provides the solution that the agreement on the reciprocal attitudes of the colonizer and the colonized subjects can resolve the postcolonial trauma and recurring memory of the past (Gandhi, 1998, p. 11). The same concepts of the memory, individual’s personal experience and the narrativization of the past, Asghar’s embodiment, agency, and autobiographical elements related to cultural influence have been taken as the method of analysis proposed by Sidonie Smith.

Smith is of the view that the past events and references help in managing the present self (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 3). She touches upon the basis of the traumatic experiences by focusing on the memory, experience, identity, embodiment, and agency (Smith & Watson, 2001, pp. 15-6). Smith and Watson have followed the same tradition of discussing the memory as traumatic many a times by giving the

reference of Caruth, Felman, and Laub (Smith & Watson, 2001, pp. 21-2). She elaborates on repressing the memory to survive in life, however, the same repressed memory brings the colonial aporia and amnesia (Smith & Watson, 2001, pp. 21-2). In contrast to it, Smith and Watson describe the same aporia as therapeutic in nature (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 22). However, she is of the view that the same body matters a lot in such cases in which the memory is associated with the body. They write, “when the body becomes visible, how it becomes visible, and what that visibility means. (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 38)” is important to comprehend the value of agency associated with that body. They also differentiate between the narrating ‘I’ and the narrated ‘I’ (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 60).

METHODOLOGY

The current study is qualitative in nature since psychoanalytical technique is used to explore Asghar’s presence in the autobiographical text as the narrated ‘I’ as well as the narrating ‘I’. She declares her experience of the subjugated and oppressed being not only as the agent of power but also as the fragile body without any power of bringing a change in her condition. In relation to this, Sidonie Smith is of the view that “both the narrating “I” in the temporal present and the narrated “I”s of earlier times are multiple, fragmented, and heterogeneous.” (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 61). Moreover, she has paved the path for the understanding of the subject’s existence in her immediate cultural location in the collectivity of the community of the survivors of that trauma that is under study

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Fatimah Asghar’s autobiographical work *Finding the Hammam*, is the reminiscent of her past memory which is, according to her, the traumatic experience for her. Whereas, the postcolonial world from where she belongs, needs to be recalled and not shunned as the useless idea or traumatic memory. Her personal experience that she narrates with “I”, is the single anecdote which is not enough to categorize the whole collection of memories as traumatic or postcolonial areas’ monolithic essentialist representation. Her memory creating her trauma is also a part of the memory forgotten because of the amnesia which is the postcolonial limbo that has ruined the present and wiped the painful past of the colonial era. Considering

the same colonial amnesia as therapeutic in nature, brings the critical situation for the subjects of the postcolonial world where in Memmi's words as described earlier, a "New Man" appears.

Asghar starts her prose from the line, "The Salon was where I went to feel safe" (Asghar, 2019). The serious injury and threat to the physical integrity of self is portrayed by her by presenting her case as the sufferer of the postcolonial world seeking refuge in the America. Her repetition of the same memory and seeking abode in the liberated atmosphere where only women are present, is the act of avoiding the repetition of the traumatic memory. Fatimah has used the technique of verbalization of the trauma in the form of her prose narration. She furthers the concept, "It became quite clear to me that I couldn't just walk outside freely without a man to help "protect" me" (Asghar, 2019). According to Caruth (1996), it is the Freudian concept of trauma depicting the wound of the mind (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). According to Caruth (1996), the trauma haunts the memory after the event happening (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). That is the reason, Fatimah writes her real life account later in her life as the source of expressing her trauma.

The exile or leaving the country or becoming the diaspora or expat support the latency of trauma. But, in Asghar's case, leaving the postcolonial country and finding solace in the Western liberated world gives her the freedom to verbalize the trauma. Caruth (1996) mentions Freud's words, "it forced me to leave my home, but it also freed me of the fear" (p. 23). Same is the case with Fatimah Asghar. Another psychiatrist Judith Herman (in her book *Trauma and Recovery*) declares narrative as an empowering and effective therapeutic method in the treatment of trauma victims. Asghar's narrative is also an "organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical content", contribute to healing and recovery (Caruth, 1996, p. 177; Andermahr, 2016, p. 13)

Nonetheless, Fatimah exposes her project as the resistance towards the men outside her house who become the cause of her discomfort in the postcolonial world where the fear engrained in the psyche of the men and the women also, to be abducted or raped by the colonizers is the serious threat and the haunting memory. There is the trauma of the painful past but at the same time the amnesia of the colonial past hitherto creating the actual problem. The same amnesia bringing forward the postcolonial terror and new identification of brown men as a cultural change project of the Imperialists is the base for the postcolonial trauma of Asghar. The treatment for such trauma in the form of exile or leaving the problematic area, according to Caruth (1996), is required by the patient but Gandhi calls it the colonial

amnesia losing the cord of the past means losing the background reality attached to the patient of the colonial past and the sufferings of the past or the previous generation. Leaving the postcolonial land and the memories hints towards leaving the inheritance and committing the crime of forgetting the colonial past and its atrocities.

Leela Gandhi asserts that it urges patients to use the technique of free-association with the past situations, allowing them to reveal the hidden meanings in their lives and their behaviour' (Lyotard, p. 93; Gandhi, 1998, p. 8). Asghar tries to give a new meaning to her past by recalling it and narrativizing the trauma of being sexually harassed by the school boys in the school for being a girl with no agential power.

When Bhabha asserts the painful past creating trauma, he focuses on the trauma of the colonial past and not the postcolonial past. He calls the same memory the necessary but "hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity" (Bhabha, p. 63; Gandhi, 1998, p. 9). Asghar, on the other hand, put the memory as detrimental for the self. She declares the confined "women-only" place as the safer place (Asghar, 2019). Her traumatic experiences of harassment during school days in Jordan are the instances of beleaguered past which in the first place were the aftermaths of the colonial past and the cultural amnesia in the colonized past. Leela Gandhi exposes these phantasmic memories as alien, antagonistic and unfathomable to the suffering self (Gandhi, 1998, p. 10).

Fatimah Asghar's account is the resistance towards the postcolonial world where she feels herself colonized by men. She mentions her confinement in the salon, when the receptionist announces in a hurry, "A man is here! A man is here! A man!" A maintenance man had come to fix a pipe that was broken in the building" (Asghar, 2019) but the nervousness and the anxiety felt at that time created the traumatic lacuna in the unconscious memory which in the later time created temporal fixity and the trauma. The presence of the new postcolonial brown man leads to the colonial memory of the presence of the white man as the threat to the Muslim women's veil.

The temporal fixity mentioned above is the main cause of Fatimah's consideration of her threatened self and its integrity and inescapability at the time of the violence. This terror is localized and she feels herself liberated and free to write the account of the past memory to treat her trauma while living in America. , the same trauma is the excavation of the amnesia of the colonial past. Her depiction of Jordan's degraded morality is actually the commentary on the atrocities of British Empire's

colonization project which destroyed the cultural values of the colonies.

Fatimah writes in her prose, “Because I felt an aloneness, an otherness that I could not talk about with anyone”, it created the trauma that haunts her later. She tries to alleviate the sense of traumatic memory through her writing. Her prose work provides her the platform to treat her traumatic past, probing deeper into the real cause and recreate her new agential power through her renewed lived experience. That high-pitched memory of the sexual violence levels down because of her emotional outburst while looking at the man in the ‘women-only’ zone. She has deliberately selected Hammam as the place of rejuvenation to provide women with the treatment for their similar traumatic lived experiences.

CONCLUSION

Hence, the whole discussion reveals that Fatimah Asghar, as the diaspora writer uses her writing capabilities to rediscover her trauma and resolve it. But, the trauma has the colonial past engrained and entwined in the roots of the postcolonial world which is the part of postcolonial rupture of the unresolved past. The aporia or the colonial trauma and the postcolonial problematic memory of the childhood experience are the two paradoxes in Fatimah Asghar’s prose. One needs to be resolved by exploration and discussion while the resolution of the later trauma actually brings the amnesia of the former. Therefore, a critical inquiry and treatment is required which needs to be imposed on the whole postcolonial society to get rid of the evils.

Therefore, the project of identifying the harassment incident of Fatimah Asghar’s childhood by the school boys is the traumatic memory of Jordon which makes it the postcolonial world’s suppression of Asghar’s self while the same trauma is associated with the colonial past also. The loss of the traumatic memory also brings the amnesia of the colonial past. The two cases are intertwined which need to be resolved.

The current prose can be explored further with postcolonial feministic lens to excavate the atrocities of patriarchal world. The psychoanalysis as well as the postfeministic aspects can also be applied to generate the further research in the field of study. In the meanwhile, the same prose can also be studied for postcolonial sensibilities in relation to posthumanistic maiming capabilities with moral or psychological disabilities.

REFERENCES

- Andermahr, S. (Ed.). (2016). *Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism* (1st ed.). Basel, Switzerland: Shu-Kun Lin. Retrieved December 21, 2019
- Asghar, F. (2019, April 1). *Prose From Poetry Magazine: Finding the Hammam- In favor of Haraam auntie Poetics*. (poetry foundation) Retrieved January 1, 2020, from poetryfoundation.org: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/149466/finding-the-hammam>
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience- Trauma, Narrative nad HHistory*. USA: The JOhn Hopkins University Press. Retrieved December 21, 2019
- Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial THEory: A Critical Introduction*. Australia: Allen & Unwin. Retrieved December 21, 2019
- Olive, J. (2014). *Postcolonial Trauma Narratives: Traumatic Historiography and Identity in Amitav Ghosh's The Calcutta Chromosomes*. Atlanta , Georgia, USA: Georgia State University PRes. Retrieved December 21, 2019, from https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1171&context=english_theses
- Smith, S., & Watson, J. (2001). *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2 ed.). USA: University of Minnesota Press. Retrieved December 20, 2021
- Visser, I. (2011, July). Trauma Theory and Postcolonial literary Studies. (S. Andermahr, Ed.) *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47(3), 250-265. doi:10.3390/h40x000x