



WEIGHT OF UNREST: EXPLORING TRAUMA AND SURVIVAL THROUGH THE SWALLOWS OF KABUL BY YASMINA KHADRA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

In the late 20th century Afghanistan, several political events from the Soviet invasion or the rise of the Mujahideen to the reign of the Taliban and the US intervention at the beginning of the 21st century turned out to be culturally as well as socially impactful. Therefore, the reign of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 is one such political event in Afghanistan's history that has been perceptively associated with the discourses of pain, trauma and suffering. The coming of the Taliban to political power in 1996 and their strict implementation of radical Sharia law over the Afghan population not only forced them to follow the Taliban hegemony but also put them through traumatic experiences. The Taliban's formulation of several diktats on morality, mobility, and visibility of women and their gender apartheid policies not only impacts their basic human rights but also puts their life into existential crises. The continuous surveillance on the mobility, morality and visibility from the micro level to the macro level by the Taliban militiamen has created an atmosphere of terror and threat for people. The misogynistic and overtly patriarchal attitude of the Taliban's policies impacts their everyday lives and experiences. Such effects of trauma are felt by individuals from the physical to the psychic level, then to the collective and cultural realms. Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul* has captured such traumatic experiences of the people during the Taliban reign from 1996 to 2001. Through the narrative of Atiq and Mussarrat and Mohsen and Zunaira, the novel reflects on the discourses of pain and trauma. However, the novel also displays the indomitable spirit of the characters for survival. The strategic use of the burqa by Zunaira and Mussarrat and their plan to escape the Taliban's punishments also weave another counter-narrative that deals with the discourse of survival. This paper intends to explore such traumatic events and their impact on the psyche of the individual that leads an individual to the suspension of reason and logic, through this novel. This paper analyzes how the fanaticism surrounding religion dominates every aspect of their life. It will also address their will to survive the grim realities and their negotiations, weaving the counter-narrative, and subverting the status quo.

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Introduction

Cathy Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) has described that – “the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind – a wound inflicted by an emotional shock so powerful that it breaches the mind's experience of time, self and the world and eventually manifests itself in dreams and flashbacks. In this conception, an occurrence is traumatic not simply because it is forceful, but because it is unthinkable, in that it ‘resists simple comprehension’” (Caruth, 1996, p. 6). In the late 20th century, Afghanistan, several political events from the Soviet invasion or the rise of the Mujahideen to the reign of the Taliban and the US intervention, turned out to be such events that are culturally as well as socially traumatic. In the context of Afghanistan, it has been observed that the social, cultural and political norms are interrelated and sometimes the political codes are performed in accordance with the religious values. It is reflected in the analysis of Omar Sadr when he discovers, “The political culture of Afghanistan is an infusion of religious and traditional elements, divided subcultures and mutually reinforcing fissures. Social structures and political culture of Afghanistan differ from region to region, from one nationality to the other, encompassing a heterogeneous ethnicity, religion and language. Afghanistan is a minority's country, since no ethnic group makes up more than a third of the population” (Sadr, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, the reign of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 is one such political event in Afghanistan's history that has been perceptively associated with the discourses of pain, trauma and suffering. The coming of the Taliban to political power in 1996 and their strict implementation of radical *Sharia* law over the Afghan population not only forced them to follow the Taliban hegemony but also put them through traumatic experiences. The Taliban's formulation of several diktats on morality, mobility, and visibility of women and their

gender apartheid policies not only impacts their basic human rights but also puts their lives into existential crises. The continuous surveillance on the mobility, morality and visibility from the micro level to the macro level by the Taliban militiamen has created an atmosphere of terror and threat for people. The misogynistic and overtly patriarchal attitude of the Taliban's policies impacts their everyday lives and experiences. Such effects of trauma are felt by individuals from the physical to the psychic level, then to the collective and cultural realms. Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul* has captured such traumatic experiences of the people during the Taliban reign from 1996 to 2001. Through the narrative of Atiq and Mussarrat and Mohsen and Zunaira, the novel reflects the discourses of pain and trauma. However, the novel also displays the indomitable spirit of the characters for survival. The strategic use of the burqa by Zunaira and Mussarrat and their plan to escape the Taliban's punishments also weave another counter-narrative that deals with the discourse of survival. This paper intends to explore such traumatic events and their impact on the psyche of the individual that leads an individual to the suspension of reason and logic, through this novel. This paper analyzes how the fanaticism surrounding religion during the reign of the Taliban dominates every aspect of their life. It will also address the will to survive the grim realities and the negotiations with the condition, weaving the counter-narrative and subverting the status quo through Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul*.

Trauma in *The Swallows of Kabul*

The novel *The Swallows of Kabul* by Yasmina Khadra begins with the vivid description of a traumatic event: the stoning of a woman. The spectacle of the public execution of a woman accused of adultery and the gathering of the people to witness such a spectacle, weave a narrative of violence and terror. It represents a cultural trauma where, according to Jeffrey C Alexander, "members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to horrendous events that leave indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2015, p. 1). The public lynching, spectacles of punishment for minor causes describe the horror the people of Afghanistan are living through. The agitation of the common people and the mass hysteria in the name of religion drives/ controls the lives of people like Mohsen Ramat, a university-educated fellow. He is living in an existential crisis due to the unstable socio-cultural-political environment and war. The events like hanging of two young men from the traveling crane and slitting the throat of a murderer become a nightmare to people. The grim realities of day-to-day life haunt people. They live in a precarious situation which shapes their behavior, attitude to life. Violence becomes the daily fabric in their lives. With the coming of the Taliban to Power, the whole of Kabul has turned into a vestibule where the moral police of the Taliban keep their eye on everyone; even the slightest mistake receives unbearable punishment. Therefore, cultural trauma seeks to destabilize the naturalistic cause-and-effect process of events and attempts to construe traumatic events as a culturally constructed and socially mediated process. Mohsen Ramat is such a victim of cultural trauma. He loses his reasoning ability, and the collective frenzy over the spectacle drives him to the spot where he also participates in it, and throws stones towards the woman. The hysterical stoning of the frenzied mob leads the woman into death, but her rigidity in the face of death redoubles her suffering, it is as if, "they're exorcising their own demons through those of the succubus, some of them fail to notice that the crushed body is no longer responding to their attacks and that the immolated, half buried woman is lying lifeless on the ground, like a sack of abomination thrown to the vultures" (Khadra, 2002, p. 10). His conversation with Zunaira reveals the psychological impact of such traumatic events under Taliban rule. The frenzy makes him forget the location of his own house. He becomes a patient with dementia. His confession to Zunaira, "I couldn't recognize any of the streets I was on. I walked up and down them, but it seemed that I wasn't able to cross them. It was truly strange. I was in a kind of fog. I couldn't remember the way to where I was going, and I didn't know where I wanted to go" (Khadra, 2002, p. 18), reveals the impact of experiencing such an event. He confesses his inability to resist the temptation of stoning, shouting with the excited mob and his submission to the crowd to call for her blood. Mohsen, who used to be a man of conscience has turned into a puppet of Taliban by conforming to the activities of the public execution of the prostitute, as he informs Zunaira that, "I couldn't get rid of them, and an irresistible rage seemed to come into my arm... what frightens me and saddens me at the same time is that I didn't even try to resist" (Khadra, 2002, p. 19).

Atiq is also experiencing the impact of the rigid Taliban rule. His monologue embodies the distressed condition of the people of Afghanistan: "What's happening to me? I can't bear the dark, I can't bear the light, I don't like standing up or sitting down, I can't tolerate old people or children, I hate it when anybody looks at me or touches me. In fact, I can hardly stand myself. Am I going stark raving mad?" (Khadra, 2002, p. 22). Between Atiq and Mussarrat, a long silence perpetuates due to her illness and turns into a reason for their conjugal quarrel. His visiting the mosque, elongated prayer, and struggling to pay concentration to religious books reflect his disturbed personality. His conversation with Nazeesh reveals the psychological state of the Taliban's most rigid extremist rule. Nazeesh informing Atiq about his plan of walking away from Kabul and Atiq's reminding him of the shackled condition in Kabul; reveal both the physical and symbolic shackling of their bodies, minds and souls.

Another traumatic event occurs in the lives of Zunaira and Mohsen. Zunaira's stepping outside wearing a burqa with her husband reluctantly forces them to encounter humiliation. Zunaira is forced to stand outside the mosque in the scorching heat and interrogated by the Taliban. She faces the gaze and humiliation of people. Inside the burqa, Zunaira feels mummified, as it has covered the identity of women, and she is not even able to wipe off the dripping face under the threat of the Taliban. She feels like a lunatic in that straitjacket. The burqa seems to her, "annihilates her, this portable tent that constitutes her degradation and her prison with its webbed mask over her eyes like kaleidoscopic grill work over a window. She is so rebellious inside that she, in her dream, would like to refuse all the constraints of Taliban imposed on women. She thinks it's a forfeiture of her rights, "an incurable wound, a disability nothing can compensate for, a trauma beyond rehabilitation or therapy" (Khadra, 2002, p. 47). She is under the terrible rule of the Taliban, where one mistake will lead to the zeal of the Taliban. She holds her rage only to avoid

the danger of the Taliban. The Taliban's ban on even strolling on the path has become a nightmare for the people. The discourse of religion has overpowered the people. They are trained not to use their reason or logic to question authority. Taliban try to establish their hierarchy in the name of religion. The extreme poverty, torturous laws, and the attempt to make people frenzy in the name of religion make the situation miserable for the people of Afghanistan.

Whether it's the narrative of Zunaira, Mohsen or of Atiq and Musarrat, they project the public/ private chaos they are dealing with. The moral degradation they have been facing makes the scenario absurd. The war has delved into the psyche of people, and they have lost their reason to find out right and wrong. The power politics of the Taliban crumbled basic human rights. The hierarchy has kept imposing suppression on the poverty-stricken, disabled marginalized sections. In the name of religion, the repressive state apparatus has executed its ideology. The war-torn Afghanistan has turned into a site where death (physical and psychological) is a sad reality.

Zunaira's putting on the veil/burqa as it has been dictated by *Shariah law* and deciding never to remove it, pose resistance towards it. Mohsen tries to persuade her, but she declines. During an argument, Mohsen Ramat strikes his hand over her face; incidentally Mohsen falls to the floor and dies. Zunaira has been accused of murdering her husband by the Taliban and put in jail. Atiq has been assigned to take care of her inside the jail. Zunaira is going to be executed publicly on some Friday for the crime of killing her husband without any trial or evidence.

Inside jail, Atiq Shaukat gets a glimpse of Zunaira's beauty while praying undonning her burqa. The look of Zunaira revives Atiq as he has not seen any woman's face on the street of Kabul. They seem like swallows of different colours. Under the burqa, they look like ghosts. For him, women are "only ghosts, voiceless...proximity of men" (Khadra, 2002, p. 66). Atiq's mechanical life gets revived after his encounter with Zunaira. After learning the truth about Zunaira, Mohsen tries to rescue her from this situation. He pleads to Qassim Abdul Jabbar and Mirza Shah, for the innocence of Zunaira, but the corruption of the system leaves him no option. Atiq opens the lock of the jail and asks Zunaira to escape, but Zunaira refuses to go or escape. She thinks life in Afghanistan is equal to death, and she utters, "we've already been killed, all of us. It happened so long ago. We have forgotten it" (Khadra, 2002, p. 74).

The Survival Spirit

Mussarat, out of spousal duty, makes a plan to escape the death of Zunaira. She proposes to Atiq that she will replace Zunaira in the cell, as under the burqa, their identity is not going to be checked. In this way, Atiq can save Zunaira's life. In Afghanistan, women have only the identity of a burqa. The replaced person's identity will not be noticed by anyone, as their identity will remain hidden under the burqa. Mussarat proposes that she will sacrifice her life instead of Zunaira. She hunches the plan, "I'll slip into her cell. It won't be anything but one burqa taking another place. Nobody will bother to check the identity of the person underneath. She thinks that the woman could be Atiq's love, and her death will not be in vain. To revive the humanity of a person, who all through his life, has listened to the dictates of others, "your teachers, and your holy men, your leaders wrongs and bitterness and war" (Khadra, 2002, p. 76). As per the plan, Atiq asks Zunaira to wait outside the stadium where the clamour of execution drives the gathering into frenzy. After the spectacle of execution, Atiq starts to wait for Zunaira outside the stadium, but the day turns to night, and Zunaira doesn't arrive. Her disappearance drives Atiq mad. He starts uncovering the burqas of other women in search of Zunaira. He becomes a crazy man whom people start stoning, out of rage, utters, "Hang him, crucify him! Burn him alive!". Atiq's obsession with Zunaira becomes the reason for his death. It reflects the subversive power of the burqa, which the Taliban has imposed over women as a threat. But the escape of Zunaira under a burqa and the execution of another woman under a burqa has become a threat to the Taliban. It has showcased the failure of the Taliban to suppress the voice of women. The burqa becomes a tool of empowering women, a way of protest against the suppressive laws of the Taliban. The burqa provides a space to women where they can negotiate with the condition, survive the reality and assert their identity. It provides an agency to subvert the authoritative Taliban rule.

Conclusion

Every character mentioned in the novel has undergone trauma, be it physical or psychic. It impacts their lives collectively as well as individually. The long-standing war spanning from 1978 to 2001 and the infliction of the violence have left deep scars on their souls. The experiences of Atiq and Mussarat, or of Zunaira and Mohsen capture the terror and oppression during the Taliban reign. Along with the traumatic events, the novel has captured the surviving spirits of the characters. The use of the burqa as an agency that channels the resistive potential of Zunaira and Mussarat to the patriarchal authority of the Taliban, weaves the counter narrative. The plan of interchanging the identity and the disappearance of them in the burqa captures the surviving spirit of the women. It challenges the patriarchal authority and poses a threat to Taliban rule. Therefore, this paper has unfolded the fanaticism surrounding religion during the reign of the Taliban that dominates every aspect of their life, along with capturing the surviving spirits of the people by subverting the status quo through Yasmina Khadra's *The Swallows of Kabul*.

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