

Manifestation of Trauma: A Study of Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone*

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Abstract

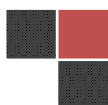
Soviet-Afghan conflict (1978-89) is one of the deadliest conflicts of the contemporary world. It started when the Soviet Union took over Afghan government and came in direct conflict with the Afghani people and mujahedeen (rebels). As there was already political instability in Afghanistan, Soviet invasion caused more turmoil and resulted in total anarchy. Even after Soviet departure, there came no solution to the conflict and mujahedeen groups started fighting among themselves. This paper attempts to study the trauma of women in the above said conflict through the contemporary Afghani-French novelist Atiq Rahimi's Prix Goncourt winner novel *The Patience Stone* (2008). It aims to bring forth the trauma and its manifestation in two major characters i.e., the unnamed protagonist and the minor character the mad woman who stand symbolic for the women of Afghanistan who were caught amidst the cataclysm of war, domestic violence, religion and patriarchy. This paper uses prism of ideas expressed by prominent trauma critics like Dominick LaCapra in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) and Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experiences* (1996) to critically analyse the text.

Keywords: war, violence, trauma, subjugation, confession, madness.

The twentieth century saw some of the bloodiest, long-drawn conflicts in human history. The Soviet-Afghan conflict (1978-89) is one of the deadliest among those and with long lasting repercussions. At the height of its power and amidst international power struggle, Soviet Union's takeover of the Afghan government toppled the country's already unstable political environment. It caused turmoil and resulted in total anarchy, with Soviet heads coming into direct conflict with the Afghani civilians and mujahedeen (rebels). The social and political landscape of the country was changed so effectively that even after Soviet's departure, in-group armed civil conflict between mujahedeen groups continued. Women are often the worst victims of any war and this conflict gave no different outcome. Caught between residual traditions of a patriarchal society and political unrest of recent history, the Afghani women had little say in the social, economic, and political changes happening in the country. So, while men were busy bolstering their ideologies with fratricidal wars, the women were left behind unprotected, powerless, and quizzically liberated. Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* makes a conscientious effort to capture the realities faced by women against the backdrop of the mortar fire and gunshots. The book employs psychological and emotional disintegration of its unnamed female characters to draw attention to the violence and trauma faced by women during such a warfare.

The protagonist, an unnamed woman is a victim of patriarchy, gender and domestic violence, and war. In the introduction to this book, Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*, describes the nameless heroine as "a conduit, a living vessel for the grievances of millions of women like her". She is left nameless because she stands in for Everywoman, easy to replace with another from her country or some woman from around the corners of the world. She is dependent first on her birth family and later her husband, subjecting her to endless battering and gender inequalities evidence of which are littered throughout the text. The book reiterates this with a childhood where she is beaten by her father and later by her husband and her in-laws, and also how she is married to a photo and a khanjar of her husband when she turned seventeen. Even the sanctimonious mullah of the neighbourhood keeps a bad eye on her, lying-in-wait to take advantage of her situation. Yet, it's the bullet that hits and turns her husband comatose that shatters through her resilience and silence. Her world is turned upside-down and her husband's unconsciousness pushes her in a realm of confusion, anger, and confessions which expose her trauma. Her feelings towards her husband's current state are complex and incomprehensible, oscillating between her abject anger over how he sacrificed her to the war and the novel liberation as, for the first time in their marriage, she is able to open her heart in front of him. Despite ten years of marriage, it's his silence that frees her to speak. "Your breath hangs on the telling of my secrets" (67), she says, smacking a reversal of power. "I can talk to you about anything, without being interrupted, or blamed!" (67).

These confessions become loquacious and uninhibited as we dive deeper into the story. The unnamed woman's inner turmoil builds into an outspoken riff that lays open the inequalities of sexes, and the traditional confines of the codes that bar true intimacy. She freely shares with her husband the spoken and unspoken aspects of her life, laying out her deepest desires, pains, and secrets, all the while chastising him for his negligence towards her. She strokes his beard, eyes, and lips with love, her husband's unconsciousness allowing her to seek perverse intimacy, such as in kissing his lips like they had never done before. The lack of aggression from him thaws her heart and makes



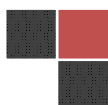
her yearn for the love which had always been missing in their marriage. She pleads to return to her, her voice getting harsh, dominant, and mocking as the days pass without any change in him. She accuses him for her miserable condition and says, “And you, you know that you had a wife and two daughters!” She subjects herself to violence, punching her stomach twice as if to beat out the heavy words buried in her gut. She continues on a cry, “Did you think of us for even a second, when you shouldered that fucking Kalashnikov? You son of a...” (14). The unnamed protagonist is in an emotional flux of hate and fear which resonates again and again to highlight her blocked anguish and powerlessness. In the book *Handbook of Medical and Psychological Hypnosis: Founding, Application, and Professional Issues*, Gary Elkins explains this phenomenon by quoting that, “It maybe be strange to think of any angry person as feeling helpless because any anger is often thought to reflect power, but in many instances, it may reflect attempts to feel more powerful when one does not.” (467) Also, as explained by Mark Goulston in *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder for Dummies*, feeling such as fear, anxiety, irrationality, confusion, anger, and sadness, which linger after any traumatic event happens are indicative of trauma. The protagonist’s similar disarray of emotions of hate, fear, anger, confusion, and helplessness are repetitive and repercussions of her trauma.

Employing a simple example such as that of a train collision to explain trauma, Cathy Caruth explains in her book *Unclaimed Experiences*:

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot of where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychological and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his own shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a “traumatic neurosis.” This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of the symptoms is called the “incubation period.” (17)

This is evident in how when the “accident” happens, i.e., her husband is shot and becomes comatose, the unnamed woman with a clear history of traumatic experiences enters a realm of psychological incubation wherein everything else around her starts to lose any meaning or sense. All the familiar structures in her cognition breakdown, and she gets trapped in the cycles of anger, frustration, and helplessness, all indicative of her ‘traumatic neurosis.’

As the story progresses, a dramatic shift is seen in the behaviour of the unnamed protagonist. The more psychological sovereignty she gains from her husband’s unconscious presence, the more she revisits all those instances of abuse and oppression from her past wherein her husband had played the role of the oppressor. It invokes in her repressed pain and anger, in-turn making her ‘act out’ by transferring her oppression onto her husband. Dominick LaCapra terms this as “transference” in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. She remembers an instant where he drunkenly slept with her while she was asleep, then beat her for not forewarning him and making him ‘unclean’ with her period blood. And so, with much satisfaction, she smirches her genital blood in his beard, symbolic of her rebellion against the subjugation of the oppression done by her husband. This incident marks the beginning of the ‘acting out’ phase of her trauma. She mocks her husband by saying, “Look! That’s my blood too... what’s so disgusting about this blood?” she rubs her hand on his nostrils. “You were born of this blood! It is cleaner than the blood of your body!” (31). The mockery isn’t just of her husband’s

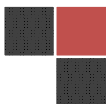


dignity but the whole of radical Islamist taxonomy that deems menstrual blood impure and bloodshed of war pure and honourable. The protagonist struggles to cope with her harsh past, lending sharpness to her outcry as she pours all her bitter thoughts to her husband. She sheds all inhibitions as she declares that, “it would be better if a stray bullet finished you off, once and for all.” (36)

LaCapra explains ‘acting out’ as, “the repetition compulsion—the tendency to repeat something compulsively. This is very clear in the case of people who undergo trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if they are still fully in the past, with no distance from it.” (142-43) The protagonist is ‘acting out’ her blocked frustration by the means of confession and bold actions. Her husband’s unmoving body acts as an absorbent for all her toxic thoughts and feelings, sucking up all her heaped anger. For so long she was a mocked and voiceless spectator of her own life. But as she relives all those memories, she is able to re-experiences them with more liberation as she expresses her feelings and frustrations with her own uninterrupted monologues. He inevitable becomes her *sang-e sabur*, the patience stone from Persian lore to which “you confess everything in your heart, everything you don’t dare tell anyone” (71). The magic stone “listens, absorbing all your words, all your secrets, until once fine day it explodes... And on that day, you set free all your pain, all your suffering” (71).

The novel often resembles a play or film scenario than fiction, letting the dramatics play out the complexity of both the reality of war and human nature rather than bogging down the reader with endless prose of moral philosophy. Thus, the story employs hallucinations and illusion which are symbolic of the protagonist’s severe PTSD to further illustrate how warfare and rigid social norms left woman vulnerable to trauma. While the unnamed woman is symbolic of resilience in much of the story, at instances, the strain of war and personal turmoil makes her succumb to the psychological distress. Overwhelmed, she claims that a heavenly voice is guiding her. She calls her own voice as the “voice buried for thousands of years” (129). It raises finger at the gender inequalities being perpetuated without change and leaving women powerless. As the visceral narrative reaches its climax, she gets increasingly carried away with her confessions, until in her heightened ecstasy she reveals her most dangerous secret. She tells her husband that he isn’t the father of her daughters. She carries onto meta-fictionally declare herself the messenger, the Prophet who is guided by the voice of the divine God. Thus, declaring their story as a religion and their bodies, wounds, pain, pleasure, secrets as revelations. These confessions spiral until her ultimate confession brings her husband into life. In the concluding act, the husband strangulates her for ruinously emasculating him, but she plunges the *khanjar* into his heart and liberates herself from all miseries.

Though the protagonist of the story is the unnamed woman, the novel also uses the role of a minor character, an old woman to symbolize the future of women in conflict zones. She had witnessed the brutal murder of her husband and sons, so her brain snapped away from the reality to cope with the loss and the pain. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* says that, “witnessing extreme physical violation or exposure to severe violence and death often increases the intensity of the trauma causing frequent fits of anxiety, helplessness, and terror” (24). She also says that, “Traumatized people often acts as though their nervous systems have been disconnected from their present” (25). This



behaviour is seen in the character of old woman in the story, wherein her madness qualifies her trauma. She is shown to use vague phrases like “dance of dead” “oh King! Come back my King!” and narrates her story without any definitive meaning or sequences in her storytelling. Her irrational story is symptomatic of her memory loss, the recollection of events and phrases were just a shadow of an absent voice and a collective of memories fragmented due to the strain of trauma and loss. It causes her to speak as if in a language of her own, wherein the disconnect in understanding of meaning keeps her and the reality separate. Louis Sass in *Madness and Modernism* mentions observations in trauma patients who “employ common words in personalized and idiosyncratic ways without bothering to explain what they mean or even to indicate that they are using them in some special or metaphorical sense” (177). In *World of Hurt*, Kali Tal explore a similar phenomenon and how traumatic experiences cause a change of meaning in the sign people use to represent their experiences. He writes, “Word such as blood, terror, agony, and madness gains new meaning within the context of trauma, and survivors emerge from the traumatic environment with a new set of definitions” (16). Similarly, in the text, the old woman’s recurring motifs such as the King remain ambiguous and it’s left to open debate if the King represents the protector or the destroyer. No matter how minor a character, the old woman reflects back the usually forgotten stories highlighting depth and dimension needed to understand trauma of women in conflict.

Thus, it can be concluded that the anonymous female characters in the novel showcase the battered position of numerous women who are doubly marginalised in the patriarchal conflict zones. The wide array of emotions exhibited by the protagonist, her confessions and madness of old woman can be seen as some of the ways in which trauma manifests itself. While the unnamed woman uses confession as instrument for survival and through them, she acts out her blocked anguish, the old woman succumbs to complete insanity projecting the physical and mental loss warfare can bring.

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