



Nurturing Resilience: Fiction as a Therapeutic Lens in Shonali Bose's *Amu*

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Keywords :

Amu, Trauma, Therapeutic Lens, Shonali Bose

ABSTRACT

The research paper explores the therapeutic role of literature in addressing trauma, focusing on Shonali Bose's novel "*Amu*." Through an examination of the 1984 Delhi riots, the paper reveals how the characters' grapple with personal and collective trauma. Kaju, the protagonist, seeks her roots, unravelling a connection to the riots and engaging in a journey of self-discovery. Drawing on trauma theory, the narrative portrays the intrusive nature of traumatic memory and the characters' attempts to reconcile with their past. Kabir's play on the riots, Kaju's nightmares, and the widows' struggles exemplify varied responses to trauma, emphasizing the multidimensional aspects of healing. The novel serves as a platform for survivors to verbalize their unspoken pain, offering a path to collective mourning and potential reconciliation. Shonali Bose, akin to a compassionate storyteller, addresses the silenced history, providing solace and understanding through the medium of fiction.

Introduction

The fictionalized portrayal of trauma has spurred a burgeoning body of scholarly work. This paper delves into the symbiotic relationship between national history and personal memory, elucidating how literature serves a rehabilitative purpose by providing an avenue for articulating suppressed trauma through narrative. Through the process of mourning, literature endeavors to grapple with the agonizing memories of the past, interrogate the ethical dimensions intertwined with them, and explore pathways to

healing through the re-integrative engagement with one's own history. In essence, literature functions as a 'witness' to these "memory places" (115), as articulated by Geoffrey Hartman in *The Longest Shadow* (1996). To probe how literature serves as a medium for overcoming stress and trauma, this paper centres its focus on Shonali Bose's novel, *Amu* (2004). It underscores the impact of the traumatic history of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in India on the victims, their families, and other witnesses, striving to illuminate a collective healing process through its literary representation.

Examining literary representations of trauma related to historical events such as African slavery, the Jewish Holocaust, and the Vietnam War reveals a rich body of work. However, the political upheavals in the past of South Asian nations remain relatively underexplored. Recently, there has been a sustained interest in South Asian fiction to investigate the interplay between history, memory, traumatic pasts, and their representation in literature. This essay aims to trace this contemporary fascination with the fictionalized portrayal of trauma, with a specific focus on the 1984 Delhi riots in India. Notably, it observes that after any political disturbance on the national stage, the narratives that endure often celebrate achievements and tales of victory and bravery. What often goes unnoticed, however, is the collective trauma experienced by those who lost their families. Jenny Edkins in *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (2003) argue that in contemporary times:

Victory parades, remembrance ceremonies, and war museums tell of glory, courage and sacrifice. The nation is renewed, the state strengthened. Private grief is overlaid by national mourning and blunted – or eased – by stories of service and duty. The authorities that had the power to conscript citizens, and send them to their deaths now write their obituaries. (1, emphasis added)

Upon investigating the history of the 1984 Delhi riots, it is evident that in November 1984, the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh. However, the assassination itself was a response to the counterattacks initiated by the Indian Army in June, carried out in compliance with Indira Gandhi's directives, which targeted the Golden Temple premises. This military operation resulted in a widespread massacre of Sikhs throughout the country. Parvinder Singh, in "*Kristallnacht*" (2009), astutely observes that although the attack on the Golden Temple was portrayed as an effort to capture terrorists, it was, in reality, a strategy to quell the escalating Sikh demand for a separate state, Khalistan (4). Jaskaran Kaur, in "*Twenty Years of Impunity*" (2006), illuminates how labeling the events as "riots" not only mischaracterizes the massacres but

intentionally conceals their brutal dimensions (102). Shonali Bose's novel, *"Amu,"* effectively captures the profound impact of the mass carnage on survivors and witnesses, who endured not only physical assault but also psychological scarring from what Rene Kaes terms "state-engineered" carnage (Foreword ix).

Bose, having witnessed the violence against Sikhs during the riots while studying at Delhi University, carried the trauma with her even after migrating to the United States. This lingering trauma motivated her to articulate this history through fiction. Esther Rashkin, in *"Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture"* (2008), notes that the ability to verbalize a secret indicates overcoming an obstacle to being and facilitates the process of "going-on-being" (20). This verbalization also prevents a silenced drama from being transmitted transgenerationally (20). The temporal and spatial distance Bose gained in the United States allowed her the perspective to look back on this history and voice the unheard trauma of victims and survivors. Literature serves as a recuperative medium, enabling survivors to address the open yet buried "wounds." Fiona Darroch, in *"Memory and Myth"* (2009), asserts that writing is considered therapeutic, offering a way to work through painful memories and forgotten pasts, thereby functioning as a form of healing for both the writer and the community (73).

Amitav Ghosh, a prominent novelist and academician at Delhi University during the riots, recalls witnessing the bloody massacre in *"The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi"* (2002). Ghosh describes how the violence left him psychologically traumatized. The usual response to violence, he notes, is one of "repugnance," and a significant number of people tried to oppose it to address the mass carnage. The witnesses, not directly assaulted but "ashamed and disgusted" by their failure to prevent the violence, experienced a breach in their expectations, contributing to the traumatic experience (Van der Kolk and McFarlane, *"Trauma and Its Challenge to Society,"* 1996, 27). *Amu*, the protagonist in Bose's novel, grapples with a similar feeling of helplessness and guilt for being unable to protect her younger brother during the attacks.

The portrayal of Keya in the novel reflects some of the significant traumatic experiences that Bose encountered during visits to relief camps. Similar to the novelist herself, Keya adopts a girl from a camp where the mother committed suicide unable to bear the pain of witnessing her son's murder. Even in the United States, Kaju (*Amu*) is haunted by her past, experiencing sudden flashbacks and nightmares. Unable to suppress these memories, Kaju returns to her roots, seeking the cause of her emotional turmoil. In "Psychobiology of Trauma Response" (1987) Bessel A. van der Kolk and Mark S.

Greenberg state that “[i]n many traumatized individuals, the trauma is reexperienced in the form of nightmares and flashbacks, which are often an exact reliving of actual traumatic experience” (69).

In India, Kaju grappled with an incessant urge to connect with her roots, learning from Keya's relations that Chandan Hola was her family's village, ravaged by an epidemic. However, Kaju's visit left her emotionally detached, prompting her to seek more information from Lalitha, Keya's old friend at Delhi University. It was during these visits that she befriended Kabir, whose interactions became instrumental in Kaju's quest to unravel her true identity. Despite spending her childhood in the United States, the traumatic memory of the 1984 riots persisted, manifesting in déjà vu experiences and nightmares.

Caruth's exploration of trauma's temporal aspects in "Traumatic Awakenings" (1997) is echoed in Kaju's experience, where the immediacy of witnessing the violent event belatedly takes shape. Yet, Kaju's memory actively plays a role, as noted by Antze and Lambek in "Tense Past" (1996), transforming into a 'site' that she revisits. Kaju's encounters with Kabir and visits to key locations, such as Trilokpuri and Tilak Vihar Widow Colony, serve as triggers, unveiling the layers of her buried trauma.

In her pursuit of truth, Kaju discovers the 1984 riots and the organized carnage that unfolded. Lindemann and Horowitz's insights in "The Psychological Consequences of Overwhelming Life Experience" (1987) find resonance in Kaju's reactions—nightmares, flashbacks, and a sense of sick recognition. The narrative powerfully illustrates trauma's intrusive nature, revealing how Kaju's traumatic memory resurfaces and shapes her understanding of self.

Kaju's encounter with Durga Mausi's firsthand account aligns with Van der Kolk and Van der Hart's explanation of traumatic memory's evocation in "The Intrusive Past" (1991). The narrative explores Kaju's attempts to make sense of her fragmented memories, creating a vivid portrayal of trauma's enduring impact. The episode at Tilak Vihar Widow Colony emphasizes the systemic failure to deliver justice, echoing the sentiments of the widows who lived with the haunting memories of their losses. Kaju's dilemma is expressed in the lines, “I don't want to know and yet I don't know how to stop myself” (102) from knowing the identity of her real mother. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1997) defines this as the central dialectics of psychological trauma:

The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom. (1, emphasis added)

The novel skilfully interweaves personal and collective trauma, exemplified through the characters of Kaju and Kabir. The exploration of Kabir's family dynamics and his father's perceived passivity adds a layer of complexity, mirroring the broader societal implications of the riots. The narrative underscores how trauma transcends individual experiences, affecting relationships and communities.

The plight of Sikh widows and Kaju's realization of her family's connection to the riots provide poignant moments that emphasize the unrelenting nature of trauma. The characters' internal struggles, dilemmas, and the quest for justice form a compelling narrative that speaks to the broader theme of societal apathy and inefficiency in addressing historical injustices. The trauma faced by the widow echoes the trauma that haunted Amu. Jarnail Singh in *I Accuse* (2009) commented: The terrible events of 1984 cast their long shadow, blighting even the lives of young people, who grew up in an atmosphere of the despair and bitterness of their families who had lost everything. Many of the widows feel the people responsible for their husbands' death are also to blame for all that has befallen since then. (120)

The revelation of Kaju's family's tragic fate brings forth the inexpressible trauma endured by survivors like Shanno. The narrative echoes Van der Kolk's observations about chronic helplessness and victimization. The therapeutic potential of narrativization becomes evident as Kaju, Kabir, and Keya find a form of closure and understanding through storytelling. Kabir's endeavor to write a play on the 1984 riots symbolizes a collective effort to confront and articulate the painful past. The characters' varied responses to trauma, from seeking justice to finding solace in creative expression, highlight the multifaceted nature of healing. The novel achieves its therapeutic goal as each character undergoes a process of reconciliation and acceptance.

In conclusion, "Amu" successfully navigates the intricate relationship between literature and trauma, demonstrating that recounting traumatic experiences, even in fiction, can be palliative if not

wholly curative. The novel effectively captures the pervasive presence of traumatic memory, emphasizing that its impact cannot be denied or ignored. Shonali Bose, akin to a therapist, records the suffering of survivors, reintegrating the history of the 1984 riots into collective consciousness and initiating a healing process. "Amu" opens a space to re-live and relieve the unassimilated past, mourn for the forgotten victims, and ultimately strive for reconciliation through the power of fiction.

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