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Women's Trauma in the Conflict Zones of Sri Lanka and Kashmir: Literary Representations and Reflections

Airene Kour Dutta

Research Scholar Department of Modern
Indian Languages & Literary Studies
University of Delhi



Abstract

The article examines the literary representation of the theme of trauma faced by the women living in the conflict zones in the literature based on Sri Lanka and Kashmir. The article highlights the unique yet strikingly similar representation of gendered violence, trauma, and psychological after-effects of conflict in Sri Lanka and Kashmir. The selected novels for study, *The Seasons of Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka's Civil War* and *The Rumours of Spring* by Farah Bashir are compelling narratives of the turmoil and trauma faced by women in conflict-ridden Kashmir over the past three decades and in Sri Lanka during the Civil War. In Sri Lanka and Kashmir, the ethnic and political conflicts have left indelible scars on the lives of women, ranging from sexual violence, and displacement, to psychological trauma. Through an analysis of selected literary works novels by writers from both Kashmir and Sri Lanka, the article explores how trauma is depicted, giving voice to the struggles of the women characters. Both the selected novels explore the complex relationship between gender and conflict. A comparative analysis of the thematic concerns in the works from these two regions, reveals a nuanced understanding of similar yet distinct patterns of violence and trauma faced by the women.

Keywords: Trauma, Tamil Women, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Conflict Literature, Gendered Violence, Psychological Scars, Literary Representation.

Introduction

Conflicts have been part of society since time immemorial. It has existed in various forms and is shaped by complex and multifarious aspects like historical, social, political, economic, and cultural factors. Conflicts have been studied by scholars of various fields like political science, history, and anthropology and many theories have come up to explain their causes which range from political power struggle, scarcity of resources, different fundamental beliefs, etc.

While the causes and consequences of wars and conflicts have been analysed and theorized, it is also imperative that one studies and evaluates the role of women in conflicts. The role of women in conflict zones has been multi-dimensional. From being helpless victims to active combatants to now even as peacebuilders and mediators, working in international organizations like the UN. Women's roles have been diverse and dynamic. Theoretically, they have been persecuted not simply because of it being a by-product of war but because they are exploited as part of strategy and systematic wartime tactics. Sexual violence has been a weapon of war since ancient times- from Greek and Roman epics to ancient Indian epics, a woman's body has been tarnished as a tactic to attack, demean, or suppress the men in their families, and communities. These are deliberate tactics employed during wartime to create terror not just among individual women but also their families, communities, or even nations. It is done to demoralise the opponent as women's purity and honour are considered the collective honour of the community/nation. The patriarchal social structures play an important role in how gender politics works in a traditional sense. Women according to conventional value systems are considered weak, subordinate to men, or even their property. Hence, this objectification of women and considering the purity of their body as the honour of the family, become the soft target when opponents want to suppress, demoralize the particular community, and weaken the men's position. These gender power structures render women vulnera-

ble during war times. This is labelled as “gender-based violence” (UN 1994) and is acknowledged as a war crime by the International War Tribunal. The mentality of women being a trophy or spoils of war dates back to ancient history and is evident in the works of Homer like the *Iliad*.

Judith Butler in her work, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, explores the vulnerability of human bodies, especially women, during conflict situations. She further states how women’s bodies become ‘precarious’ and ‘disposable’ in such circumstances. They become subject to extreme forms of violence, including sexual violence, so much so that it becomes normalized as a weapon of war.

Even in the 21st century, we have witnessed gross violations of human rights during conflicts from the Rwandan Genocide (1994), and the Bosnian War (1992-95), to the recent Myanmar (Rohingya) Crisis in 2017. Human rights especially those of vulnerable sections like women and children continue to be violated without any fear of prosecution due to the impunity given to them in these circumstances of war. The sexual violence perpetrated during these times forms a disturbing pattern with long-lasting and devastating consequences for the survivors ranging from sexually transmitted diseases, psychological trauma, and consequent conditions like anxiety, depression, PTSD, etc.

Sri Lanka had been the site of internal strife- the Civil War for nearly 26 years. It is a prime example of gross human rights violations according to international agencies like Amnesty International. The prolonged war was fought due to the ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority over “political representation, language and economic opportunities”. The war, which was essentially a struggle over self-determination and ethnic identity by the marginalized Tamil for an independent Tamil Eelam became a site for tens of thousands of civilian casualties and injuries. In *The Seasons of Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka’s Civil War* by Rohini Mohan, two parallel narratives are set in the times of the Sri Lankan Civil War. The novel follows the trajectories of two female protagonists in the conflict zone and their unique set of struggles. On one hand, we see a Tamil Hindu mother Indra dedicating her life to locating and freeing her son Sarva, who had been arrested under the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act. We see Indra diving headlong into the labyrinthine bureaucratic maze

of majoritarian Sinhalese Sri Lanka and risking her all including the safety of her other family members to save Sarva. She relocated from her husband’s house on a plantation to her sister’s house in the city to be close to her imprisoned son after locating him. She keeps visiting Sarva in jail and taking him his favourite home-cooked food as a symbolic gesture to keep his hope of freedom alive. The food and his mother’s regular visits become a beacon of hope for Sarva and are what kept him alive in the prison despite the torture he faced inside.

On the other hand, we have a child soldier Mugil, whose story traces the tough and uncertain lives of the civilian recruits in LTTE. Her life was a complex mix of violence and agency. Her story highlights her idealism and belief in the freedom movement and how she was ready to risk her life for it. She forgoes her family including two young children for the mission and represents the ups and downs of a recruit’s life in the jungles. She is the epitome of resilience and suffering and is a reflection of many others involved in the movement. Her story encapsulates how the conflict destroys the lives of entire communities, irrevocably changes the social fabric, and leaves individuals like Mugil struggling to find sense in the chaos. The deep sense of loss, identity crisis, and isolation faced by individuals in the aftermath of conflicts is as painful as physical violence. Physical wounds may heal but those on the mind linger on. The trauma, loss of life, feeling of helplessness, becoming homeless or relocating due to the conflict have fractured the Tamil community and its social fabric indefinitely. Mugil’s story along with Indra’s is a microcosm of the larger disaster that befell the Tamil community.

On the other side of the border, Kashmir in India was a site of conflict. Kashmir became an active ground for both terrorist and counter-terrorist activities in the late 1980s. For more than three decades now it has been shrouded in an atmosphere of uncertainty, political instability, violence, military operations, disappearances, and deaths. The impact of this conflict on women especially has been diverse ranging from direct violence to social, psychological, and even economic consequences. The patriarchal structures of the society in addition to the religious orthodox Kashmiri society have further shaped the women’s experiences in a complex way. The novel *Rumours of Spring* by Farah Bashir is a compelling and stark depiction of the coming-of-age experiences of a young girl in the early stages of the insurgency in downtown Kash-

mir. The narrator paints a vivid picture of how her life changed amid the insurgency and heavy militarisation of the city she grew up in. She gives an insight into the emotional, social, and psychological effects of a life surrounded by uncertainty, loss, and fear. The death of her grandmother, *Bobeh* marked the end of an age of innocence and nostalgia that now remained in the past. The theme of loss becomes a central theme. The regular curfews, crackdowns, news of encounters, and being stuck inside their homes for months at end wreaked havoc on their minds. The change in atmosphere was palpable at a physical level as well. The burning of the local post office in her area brought an end to the narrator's love affair which was carried through love letters. The fragmented structure of the narrative style symbolises the disjointed and fragmented nature of the conflict itself wherein time and memory are entwined in a complex manner. The loss of family members like her father and her grandmother left a deep psychological impact on her mind. The trauma of losing loved ones in conflict-ridden and turbulent times showcases how this source of grief and unresolved pain became a constant in the lives of women especially. Novels like *The Half-Mother* by Shahnaz Bashir and *The Half-Widow* by Shafi Ahmed are compelling narratives of the phenomenon of forced disappearances and the trauma faced by women who lose their male family members.

The psychological and emotional weight of the tragedies and losses of family members are central to understanding the trauma inflicted by the conflict. Even though the role of women in both Sri Lanka and Kashmir may be different they both bear the brunt and the burden of gender-based violence and the subsequent trauma in a similar manner. Their set of challenges may be different and shaped by their specific conditions but the similarity lies in their being overlooked, and their suffering being marginalised in the larger conflict narrative.

Conclusion

A comparative study of similar thematic aspects across the selected texts from Kashmir and Sri Lanka gives insight into how Tamil and Kashmiri women in conflict zones are affected by both the violence of conflict and the social and cultural factors that shape their experiences. The article also compares the dissimilarities in the social fabric and issues faced by the women despite the shared experiences across the borders. The dissimilarities lie in the diverse cultural, ethnic, and political con-

texts. This article also highlights how literature not only serves as a reflection of women's suffering but also as a medium through which they reclaim agency, memory, and resilience.

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