

The Echoes of Silence and Confessing Trauma in The Patience Stone

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Abstract— The portrayal of trauma in war literature often examines how the use of narrative and structural elements reflects the psychological and emotional impact of war and conflict, especially on women. The protagonist in Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* (2008) provides a lens through which the author highlights the intricacies of trauma. The novel illustrates the protagonist's inner turmoil by employing monologue and confessional storytelling. A textual analysis of the novel using the theoretical framework of trauma reveals the profound impact of violence, loss, and oppression, highlighting how her internal monologue exposes how trauma affects both personal and collective experiences. In his novel, Rahimi explores the psychological scars of conflict and critiques the broader socio-political dynamics that worsen them. Through his depiction of trauma, Rahimi offers a profound commentary on the enduring impact of violence on individuals and communities.

Keywords— gender, memory, trauma, violence.

I.THE DYNAMICS OF TRAUMA IN MODERN LITERATURE

In the preface to Laurie Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), trauma narratives are "personalised responses to this century's emerging awareness of the catastrophic effects of wars, poverty, colonisation, and domestic abuse on the individual psyche" (x). They go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterisation; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures (xiv). Contemporary stories about war, conflict, and warfare demonstrate trauma, which is described as a reaction to events that are highly intense and disrupt normal emotional and cognitive responses, causing lasting psychological turmoil (ix). Investigating a subject that is not only unsettling but may unnecessarily involve readers in an intricate web of victimisation becomes an engaging and potentially widely influential subject. However, a brief consideration of how trauma literature poses a number of challenging questions determines how individuals endure the devastation of trauma. Moreover, traumatizing contexts and their psychological impact are examined through writers' focus on mothers and daughters facing obstacles of poverty, sexual exploitation, class and race (xiv).

One critical aspect of trauma is that it serves as evidence of social inequality or subjugation, representing the profound toll of the harmful sociocultural establishment. This element seeks to raise readers' awareness of the various ways in which trauma can be expressed in a story, highlighting the importance of effectively depicting characters' traumatic experiences in Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* (2008). The author has skilfully integrated trauma and memory into his characters' voices while depicting how the past continues to affect the characters and by fictionalising trauma through them, as in Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing*

Trauma (2011), who discusses trauma narratives as “empathic unsettlement” or empathy without overidentification with victims, which can enable readers to work through problems or mourn rather than merely to sentimentalise victims (40-41). In the same manner how La Capra stresses the need to move from acting out (or melancholia) to working-through (or mourning), a process that restores the distinction between past, present, and future and allows for political agency (73), the novel examines the impact of trauma, providing a raw portrayal of the psychological and emotional burden imposed by war and patriarchy on individuals, especially women.

Atiq Rahimi, who holds French and Afghan citizenship, rose to prominence in 2008 by winning the Prix Goncourt for his novel *The Patience Stone*, initially written in French. Born in Kabul in 1962, Rahimi left Afghanistan in 1984, spending a year in Pakistan before seeking asylum in France. He pursued a degree in cinema at Sorbonne University and directed numerous films on Afghanistan. Rahimi has authored the novels *Earth and Ashes* (2000) and *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear* (2002). Furthermore, the author has produced three books written in French, utilising a translingual approach, such as *The Patience Stone* (2008), *A Curse on*

Dostoevsky (2013), and *Water Carriers* (2019). Collectively, these books present stories of Afghan individuals within the backdrop of Afghanistan, a country devastated by war and demarcated by ethnic tensions that underwent almost 30 years of conflict where traditions, societal norms, discrimination, and religious extremism oppressed Afghan women. This period, known as the dark era in Afghanistan's history, was marked by men committing killings and destruction, leaving behind widowed women and orphaned children. In contrast, it was the women who faced the brutalities of war and inhumanity, enduring the loss of their children and their husbands, who were the sole providers for their families. Furthermore, women had to endure all this suffering without being able to speak out. In reality, they had to bear this anguish while maintaining unyielding patience.

II. VOICE, TESTIMONY AND RESISTANCE

The Patience Stone is the English translation of “Sang-e-Saboor”, the original title of Atiq Rahimi's novel, first published in French as *Syngué Sabour* in 2008. In Persian folklore, “Sange-Saboor” symbolises a mythical stone that absorbs the pain and suffering of those who confide in it until it shatters. One significant aim of trauma narratives is to reshape cultural memory through personal context, adopting testimonial traits to prevent and bear witness against such repetitive horrors (Vickroy 5). The novel focuses on the inner world of an unnamed protagonist who grapples with her trauma by confessing to her comatose husband. Rahimi's narrative not only highlights the profound impact of trauma on an individual's psyche but also critiques the societal structures that perpetuate such suffering. He opens the story with the line “Somewhere in Afghanistan or elsewhere” (xii), possibly to highlight that it is set against the backdrop of an unnamed war-torn country, likely Afghanistan. The story begins in a chamber where a man lies motionless and silent, and his wife, whose name is revealed only at the end of the tale, ardently prays for his recovery while clutching a long string of black prayer beads. Advised by the mullah or Imam, she is instructed to recite the ninety-nine names of Allah, each ninety-nine times per day. Engrossed in her prayers and caring for the man before her, she grapples with her frustration over his injury, the trivial conflict that caused it, and the haunting memories they share, which fill her heart with torment. Much of the testimonial literature deals with extremely disturbing subjects such as incest and other sexual violence, breaking

the silence on previously taboo topics (6). Gradually, this suffering transforms into words, ultimately becoming an outlet for her emotions.

"I am going to tell you everything, my Sange-Saboor, everything. Until I set myself free from my pain, and my suffering." (79)

The protagonist uses the condition of her husband to her advantage by using him as her own "patience stone," sharing her traumas, frustrations, and secrets in a series of confessions. When the unnamed woman is not praying, she fills the time and the silence by talking to her husband and treats him like a "patience stone" to which a person:

"...tell all your problems to, all your struggles, all your pain, all your woes... to which you confess everything in your heart, everything you don't dare tell anyone. You talk to it, and talk to it. And the stone listens, absorbing all your words, all your secrets, until one fine day it explodes. Shatters into tiny pieces." (85)

The novel breaks the silence and reveals the profound pain of a woman's experience., one offered "as a proxy for the grievances" and grumbles of millions (4). The account in the novel is not just about a woman in Afghanistan but about women globally, where men's unrestrained power can deprive people of their intrinsic rights.

Zabihzadeh et al. (2015) examine the violence that the female characters encounter. They explain that these characters are subjected to domestic violence, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. They stated that the women characters face domestic violence, namely physical, sexual, and emotional violence (56). The novel's protagonist represents the silent suffering of countless women living in war-torn societies. Her trauma is a silent burden, deeply internalised and hidden beneath the surface of her daily existence. Throughout much of her life, she has endured emotional, psychological, and physical abuse, all while remaining silent—a silence imposed by a patriarchal society that demands submission and passivity from women. Her husband's coma, a result of a war injury, becomes a catalyst for her to finally voice the pain and suffering she has kept hidden for so long. The husband's silence, imposed by his vegetative state, mirrors the enforced silence of the protagonist and, by extension, of many women in similar circumstances.

Rahimi's novel is set in a society ravaged by war, where the effects of violence extend beyond the battlefield and into the private lives of individuals, particularly women. On the night of their marriage consummation, the woman was menstruating,

"When you stood up to go and wash yourself, you noticed blood on your (body). You were furious. You came back and beat me, in the middle of the night, just because I hadn't warned you that I was bleeding." (Rahimi 30)

The protagonist's trauma is not only a result of the ongoing conflict but also of her position as a woman in a patriarchal society. Her marriage, marked by emotional and physical abuse, reflects the broader societal violence that women endure. However, a potent and intricate statement that captures the main character's profound

trauma, rebellion, and the flipping of conventional power structures can be seen when the woman is seen laughing scornfully as she says "I had made you unclean" (30) which reveals powerful and complex expression that encapsulates the protagonist's deep-seated trauma, defiance, and the reversal of traditional power dynamics.

The trauma experienced by the protagonist in *The Patience Stone* has deep implications for her sense of identity. In *Trauma* (2020), Lucy Bond says that our deepest emotional connections often stem from violent histories and states that "while the traces of the past are all around us, the memories that exert the deepest pull on our emotions are often those connected to violent histories" (2). Before her marriage, her father was the one who perpetrated violence against her. She, along with her other six sisters and her mother, were subjected to emotional abuse by her father,

"All my dad cared about were his quails, his fighting quails! I often saw him kissing those quails, but never my mother, nor us, his children. There were seven of us. Seven girls starved of affection." (57)

The flashback of traumatic re-enactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility (Caruth 153). In the novel, the main character grapples with a fragmented sense of self as she tries to reconcile the different roles imposed on her – wife, mother, daughter, and woman. Her trauma, compounded by the war and her husband's condition, leads to a profound sense of loss, not only of her husband but also of her own identity.

III. TRAUMA, MEMORY AND FEMALE SELF-ASSERTION

In *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, Freud claimed that, if a person does not remember, he is likely to act out: "he reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats in, without knowing, of course, that he is repeating, and in the end, we understand that this is his way of remembering" (150). Recalling trauma is a highly intricate process that goes beyond mere memory. In Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), "the most striking feature of trauma recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory" (151). The protagonist's confessions reveal a life of forced compliance and subjugation, where her body and autonomy are continually violated. For instance, she recounts how she was pressured into conceiving children to prove her fertility and how her husband's impotence became another source of trauma.

"I knew you would be dying to find out my secret...because that child was not yours. Yes, my sang-e-sabur, those two girls are not yours! And do you know why? Because you were the infertile one. Not me!" (Rahimi 137)

Through these confessions, she begins to confront the realities of her life, acknowledging the pain and suffering she has endured. This process of self-examination allows her to regain a sense of agency, even if only temporarily. By voicing her trauma, she asserts her identity and challenges the societal norms that have sought to erase her individuality. The woman in the story experiences trauma influenced by the societal expectations placed on women in her culture. Women are anticipated to be subservient, quiet, and willing to sacrifice themselves; their value is based on their ability to have children and cater to their husbands. The protagonist's trauma is not just

personal but also represents the collective experiences of women in similar situations. Rahimi's portrayal of this gendered trauma serves as a critique of the societal norms that perpetuate violence against women, enforced through cultural and religious institutions. The protagonist's sexual encounters, whether with her husband or other men, lack agency and consent, further deepening her feelings of powerlessness. Nevertheless, her confessions provide a cathartic release, allowing her to express years of suppressed emotions, traumas, and desires. Trapped in a life where her voice has been silenced and her individuality stifled, speaking out becomes a way to reclaim her agency. Through her confessions, she begins to free herself from the psychological constraints imposed by her society, her marriage, and her own internalised guilt.

Patriarchy has been utilized by social scientists such as Weber in *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* (1947) to denote a system of governance where men govern societies by virtue of their roles as household heads. Patriarchy, according to its definition, supports chauvinism, advocating the idea that men are inherently superior to women. This belief in the inherent inferiority of women stems from biological essentialism, which relies on perceived unchanging biological differences between the sexes to define men and women (Tyson 85). In the novel, the main female character's aunt goes through a similar experience. Due to patriarchal control, her aunt faces both emotional and sexual trauma,

"My aunt...you don't know her at all...she hadn't been able to bear a child for him. My aunt was infertile...so her husband sent her to his parent's place, in the countryside, to be their servant. As she was beautiful and infertile, her father-in-law used to abuse her without a care in the world." (Rahimi 85-86)

This occurs during her marriage to a terrible rich man, highlighting her lack of agency in deciding whom to marry. As a result, she suffers emotional abuse due to her gender, leading to her voice being silenced. The abuse continues when she is sent to serve her husband's family due to her infertility without any medical proof. This emphasises male supremacy disadvantaging women through sexuality and raises the argument that "trauma is frequently caused by human-made injustice, oppression, and exploitation" (Vickroy 221). According to Hooks in *Sisterhood* (1984), women are the group that experiences the most victimisation from sexist oppression. Sexism is perpetuated by social structures and by individuals who dominate, exploit, or oppress (43). He stresses the idea that the basis for female solidarity arises from women being victimised by male domination in various ways and is potent when women unite to combat the domination and exploitation that they face due to sex, class, and race (3).

The novel's cultural backdrop highlights the collective nature of trauma, showing that the main character's experiences are widely shared. Rahimi uses this collective trauma to critique societal systems that perpetuate violence and oppression, connecting individual suffering to broader histories of violence and resilience. Despite the overwhelming nature of their trauma, the protagonist and her aunt engage in acts of resistance, both subtle and overt, that challenge the forces that have sought to silence and oppress them. Her confessions to her inert husband and the aunt's confessions to her niece, while initially a means of unburdening themselves, gradually become a form of defiance against the societal norms that have dictated their life.

The act of speaking out, even if only to a vegetative husband, is a powerful assertion of the protagonist's agency. In a society where women's voices are often suppressed, the protagonist's decision to voice her trauma represents a subversion of the silence that has been imposed on her. She reclaims her narrative through her confessions, challenging the power dynamics that have rendered her voiceless. This act of narration also serves as a means of empowerment. By voicing her trauma, the protagonist begins to confront and process the pain she has endured, gaining a sense of control over her life. While the external circumstances of her life may remain unchanged, speaking out allows her to regain a sense of power and autonomy. Rahimi's depiction of the act of confessing reflects the broader theme of resistance in the face of trauma, where storytelling serves as a way to assert one's humanity and dignity.

The novel's ending, where the protagonist's patience stone eventually shatters, symbolises the breaking point of her trauma. This shattering, while tragic, also represents a release—a liberation from the accumulated pain and suffering.

IV.CONCLUSION

Atiq Rahimi's *The Patience Stone* is a powerful exploration of trauma, offering a nuanced portrayal of the psychological and emotional toll of war and patriarchy on women. Through the protagonist's confessions to her unconscious husband, Rahimi explores the complexities of trauma, highlighting its impact on identity, the role of cultural norms in perpetuating suffering, and how individuals resist and reclaim their narratives. The novel serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, even in the face of overwhelming adversity, and offers a poignant critique of the societal structures that perpetuate violence and oppression. Through its exploration of trauma, it contributes to a broader understanding of women's experiences in wartorn societies, illuminating the silent suffering that often goes unspoken and the power of storytelling in reclaiming one's voice.

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