

Silent Sufferers Unveiled: Exploring Women's Trauma through Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls*

Sanabil Mohsin*, Dr. Mazhar Hayat** & Dr. Saira Akhter***

Abstract

*Since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, Indian-occupied Jammu and Kashmir has been subjected to aggression and state terrorism. Narratives are abundant with sombre and unresolved stories due to the ominous presence of violence. The aftermath of this violence significantly affects ordinary citizens who are the 'insignificant others' of society and unnoticed victims. Their suffering remains unspoken, untold and obscured in comparison with grander political narratives. The paper delves into the overlooked and ignored narratives of women enduring suffering silently in the face of state violence, specifically focusing on Shahnaz Bashir's poignant collection of short stories, *Scattered Souls*. Against the backdrop of the longstanding illegal occupation of Kashmir, the research underscores the unvoiced trauma experienced by women who bear the brunt of violence and loss. Drawing from Cathy Caruth's Trauma theory, the study centers on Bashir's vivid accounts of women's distressing experiences, encompassing the loss of family members and vanished husbands. This research aims to bring to the fore these marginalized voices that are suppressed by larger nationalist Hindutva narratives. Bashir's stories, acting as conduits, offer a glimpse into their concealed struggles, revealing the suppressed emotions and resilience of Kashmiri women in the face of occupation.*

Keywords: Kashmir, Trauma, Narratives, Conflict, Resilience, Memory.

* Sanabil Mohsin is a Visiting Lecturer at the Department of English, Govt. College Women University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. She can be reached at iamsanabil@gmail.com

** Prof Dr Mazhar Hayat is Chairperson at the Department of English, Govt. College Women University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

***Dr. Saira Akhter is Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Govt. College Women University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. (Corresponding Author) Email: sairaakhter@gcwuf.edu.pk

1. Introduction

Trauma, frequently identified as an emotional reaction to unfortunate occurrences such as catastrophes, assaults, or natural disasters, leaves permanent traces on its victims that appear as agitation, unanticipated sentiments, hallucinations, strained relationships, and seizures. In addition, trauma may be experienced collectively by diverse cultural groups and even subsequent generations. This phenomenon is especially prominent in nations besieged by sorrow and conflict, such as occupied Jammu & Kashmir, where people have undergone decades of Indian-orchestrated cruel mass executions, imposed disappearances, sexual assaults, and repression of free speech. Contemporary literature emerging from Indian-occupied Kashmir successfully depicts the intricacies of life-threatening conditions caused by communal disparities, cultural breakdown and conflicting geopolitical forces.

In the shadow of the protracted conflict that has marked the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir since the subcontinent's partition in 1947, an intricate and often-overlooked narrative comes into existence, one that concentrates on the silent, yet unwavering women caught in the turbulent flows of violence and unpredictability. This research analysis dives into the psychological portrayal of women's trauma in areas of contention, especially in the backdrop of Shahnaz Bashir's compilation of short stories, *Scattered Souls*. The historical context of conflict-ridden regions is replete with unidentified and unsolved narratives emerging from the volatile undercurrents of bloodshed. The experiences of those caught up in such confrontations have enormous weight within the cacophony of political narratives. Within this chaotic historical and sociopolitical background, the tales told in *Scattered Souls* offer a justified tribute to Kashmiri women's forbearance of unspoken aches and sufferings. The era of the 1990s, when the freedom movement was at its peak, gives evidence to the women's silent fortitude – a moment when their lives were forever scarred by the death of their sons, orphaning of children, and disappearance of their husbands.

As Shahnaz Bashir painstakingly constructs each account, a subtle but profound link develops, unwinding these women's buried sorrow, strength, and agency. Bashir pulls back the layers of trauma by weaving together their personal stories, showing the terrible emotional repercussions of violence. The purpose of the article is to find out how Bashir's storytelling provides an avenue through which these silent victims gain a voice, providing a look into their marginalized and subaltern histories that are frequently excluded from conventional historical records. This particular critical endeavour intends to expose the power of literature in revealing the true stories of individuals who have been marginalized and ostracized eventually compelling us to confront the human cost of war and the resilience of those who have been sidelined and silenced.

2. Literature Review

Given the primary focal points of the study, the literature review section engages in an examination of literature encompassing trauma theory, Kashmiri literature, and evaluations of Bashir's literary contributions.

2.1. Trauma Theory in Historical Exploration and Literary Portrayals

The role of trauma theory is central to the exploration and understanding of historical occurrences, as well as their portrayal in literary works. The origins of trauma analysis can be linked to the concepts put forth by Sigmund Freud, which developed during the latter part of the nineteenth century in his psychological and psychoanalytic discussions. In the words of Caroline Garland, trauma can be seen as a “kind of wound”, drawing from the ancient Greek concept of “piercing of the skin”. Sigmund Freud metaphorically employed this term to emphasize “how the mind, too, may be pierced and wounded by events.”¹ In psychiatric literature, Cathy Caruth has conceptualized trauma as “a wound inflicted on the mind.” She further

¹ Caroline Garland, *Understanding Trauma: A Psychoanalytical Approach*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2002).

elaborates that trauma emerges from a jarring encounter with an unforeseen or catastrophic incident, or a series of such incidents, resulting in responses that materialize as “delayed, uncontrolled, and repetitive manifestations like hallucinations and intrusive phenomena.”² These encounters do not immediately integrate into the mind but resurface later as recurring nightmares, hallucinations, flashbacks, and similar experiences. Caruth also identifies Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a term encompassing a constellation of symptoms that arise in survivors sometimes after a traumatic event or severe incident.

Kali Tal’s ground breaking work, “Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma” has garnered global acclaim, acting as a cornerstone in the field of Trauma Studies, regularly referred to, quoted, and mentioned. As a mentor and editor, Tal worked with several Vietnamese veteran authors and trauma sufferers. Her important engagement includes consultation duties with the Oral History Archives, to which she spent a considerable period of her life. Tal defines suffering as a uniquely personal experience, claiming that people who go through transition seldom return to a prior condition of anguish.³ She notes that the investigation of clinical data pertaining to victims of distressing situations has enabled psychiatrists to rigorously characterize the symptoms, especially those connected to PTSD, proving a relationship between war trauma and future PTSD.

Historical trauma is an aspect of psychological despair experienced by nation-states, communities, or ethnic populations. A number of scholars provide viewpoints on historical trauma in Yael Danieli’s “International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma”, examining it as the result of a “collective,

² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

³ Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

historical, and cumulative psychic wounding of a nation or tribe over a long period of time.”⁴ This type of trauma has an impact on numerous generations, appearing in the form of bodily illnesses, disruptive emotions, and aberrant conduct in both present and future generations.

A disturbing tendency occurs in conflict-torn places devastated by the ravages of war: a disproportionate number of women endure the weight of traumatic experiences. This heart breaking fact highlights the gendered dimension of conflict-related suffering, as women are frequently the major victims of violence, displacement, and loss. The trauma caused by such conditions has a permanent influence on these women's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. This troubling tendency highlights the critical need for more attention to the special issues that women experience in war-torn places. Olf contends that “women have a two to three times higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to men.”⁵

2.2. Kashmir Valley's 70-Year Evolution in Fortification and Conflict

Over the course of seventy years, the Kashmir Valley has evolved into a fiercely fortified territory rife with violence, ranking among the world's most heavily guarded enclaves. Within the compilation “Kashmir: New Voices, New Approaches”, expertly edited by Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, Bushra Asif, and Cyrus Samii, prevalent misconceptions regarding the contestation over Kashmir are steadfastly rejected. Kashmir, often termed the planet's most perilous locale, defies these common stereotypes. This region has borne witness to an unparalleled

⁴ Yael Danieli, ed., *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma* (New York, NY: Springer, 1998).

⁵ Miranda Olf, "Sex and gender differences in post-traumatic stress disorder: an update," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* (July 27, 2017): 1-2, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2017.1351204>.

and prolonged cycle of violence, marking a grim distinction as the epicenter of sustained turmoil.⁶

The assertive actions of India in Kashmir have imperilled the stability of a region of significant strategic importance, leaving its residents traumatized. In “Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War”, Victoria Schofield delves into the turmoil prevailing in Kashmir, stemming from widespread killings, torture, sexual assault, and authoritarianism. She underscores that incidents of human rights violations are now making global headlines, recounting tales of indiscriminate shootings, abuse, and torture.⁷

2.3. Critical Appraisal of Bashir's Work

Malik has evaluated the book, describing it as “well-written” and “poignant.” In his article titled “*Scattered Souls – An Appraisal*,” Malik delves into Bashir's precise exploration of the hauntingly familiar narratives of fragmented and devastated lives within Indian-held Kashmir.⁸

According to Soni Wadhwa, Bashir's contribution to the discourse on Kashmir enriches the body of literature capable of dispelling the prevailing uninformed, deeply ingrained, and exaggerated portrayal of Kashmir, along with the burdens its inhabitants bear daily. Wadhwa observes that the narratives within *Scattered Souls* unveil glimpses “from the lives of Kashmiris that are not otherwise accessible in the news stories of firing or attacks.” In a climate dominated by statistics and distorted realities, these stories depict the humanity often obscured behind mere numerical figures, casualties reduced to statistics or labelled as 'militants.' “The spectrum of the characters follows an arc of being hounded — not

⁶ Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, Bushra Asif, and Cyrus Samii, *Kashmir: New Voices, New Approaches* (New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd., 2006).

⁷ Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2003).

⁸ Ihsan Malik, “Scattered Souls – An Appraisal,” *Kashmir Life*, November 29, 2016, <https://kashmirlife.net/scattered-souls-an-appraisal-124984/>.

in the sense of some stories being more graphic or more tragic than the others, or in the sense of leaving the readers more affected than the others.”⁹

Shekhar characterizes *Scattered Souls* as a collection of narratives that intricately depict the trauma stemming from, “assault, terrorism, and growing up amidst everyday violence.” He goes on to assert that Bashir effectively amplifies the voices of “other people, other souls, trapped in the turmoil in Kashmir.” Shekhar suggests that within the backdrop of profound suffering, pain, and perseverance, Bashir has crafted a narrative that encapsulates an oddly placed sense of hope.¹⁰

According to Suraya Jan, Shahnaz Bashir used a straightforward storyline and permitted the book to infiltrate a very literal streak of fact and with the help of his characters clearly illustrated the wistful state of Kashmiri people.¹¹ Rather in his article “Conflict in Paradise and Victimised Women: An Analysis of Select Short Stories from Shahnaz Bashir’s *Scattered Souls*” contends that “Bashir has painted the picture of pain of the women in Kashmir. The conflict has rendered them useless and stripped them of their dignity. They are harassed and put to shame all the time by the security forces.”¹² Chishti & Saxena assert that “the selected stories poignantly reflect on all the atrocities women have gone through in the conflict of Kashmir, which are not heard or recorded in mainstream narratives.”¹³

⁹ Soni Wadhwa, "Kashmir's Discontent," *Deccan Herald*, January 26, 2017, <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/592593/kashmirs-discontent.html>.

¹⁰ Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, “From the violence in Kashmir come these disturbingly intimate stories of scattered and broken lives,” *Scroll.in*, May 02, 2017, <https://scroll.in/article/835066/from-the-violence-in-kashmir-come-these-disturbingly-intimate-stories-of-scattered-and-broken-lives>.

¹¹ Suraya Jan, "Scattered Souls: Portrayal of Despair, Despondence and Disheartenment of Kashmiris," *The Creative Launcher* 1, no. 6 (2017): 94-98, [https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/upload/8.%20Scattered%20Souls%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/upload/8.%20Scattered%20Souls%20(2).pdf).

¹² Mohd Nageen Rather, "Conflict in Paradise and Victimised Women: An Analysis of Select Short Stories from Shahnaz Bashir’s *Scattered Souls*," *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature (JOELL)* 4, no. 4 (2017): 118-123.

¹³ Asma Jeelani Chishti and Dr. Shweta Saxena, "Conflict and Women in Jammu and Kashmir: A Study of selected short stories from Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls*," *Psychology and Education* 58, no. 2 (2021): 6997-7000, <https://doi.org/10.17762/pae.v58i2.3241>

Shahnaz Bashir adeptly portrays the challenges faced by marginalized women, particularly within these narratives.

To sum up, the comprehensive examination of the mentioned works from diverse angles, encompassing trauma, historical, cultural, ethnic, and feminist viewpoints, lays a solid foundation for the exploration of trauma experiences in females within the chosen narrative.

3. Materials and Methods

The proposed research encompasses a qualitative evaluation of Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls* through the perspective of Trauma Theory, employing textual analysis as the method of investigation. Extracts from the text are chosen based on their alignment with the primary research inquiries. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory serves as the underlying theoretical framework for this study. Caruth's trauma theory is a well-known concept in literary and psychological studies that investigates how people perceive and respond to traumatic situations. Her work has had a significant impact on comprehending the psychological and emotional consequences of trauma, and it has been of particular benefit in analyzing traumatic events in literature and storytelling.

At the heart of Caruth's trauma theory lies the notion of “delayed understanding” or “deferred action,” as she expressively enunciates: “What characterizes this type of traumatic experience is not exactly what happens there, in the violent or destructive event, but rather the way in which what has happened there comes back to haunt the survivor later on.” Caruth proclaims that over recent decades, there has been a bigger concern regarding “the suffering entailed in trauma.” People have realized the significance of learnedness more and more about the survivors’ feedback on the intense traumatic incidents. Now there is a desire to

attain the methods “of helping to alleviate the suffering” of survivors. Such methods are estimated to distribute the connections within “both individual and group trauma” and consequently back the elucidations of the cognitive anomalies of persons and nations suffering from the after-effects of vicious episodes. For that reason, the drive of the research and investigation of trauma is “to understand the nature of the suffering and to help relieve it” through catharsis in the form of narration.

Traumatic events, Caruth contends, frequently transcend an individual's cognitive and emotional capacity at the time of occurrence. Instead, the full impact of trauma is typically delayed, appearing later in fragmented and disconnected ways. This delayed comprehension is a hallmark of trauma, and it is typically accompanied by symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, and obtrusive ideas. Caruth's statements capture her attention on the significance of language and story in trauma healing and portrayal: “It is the story that becomes the site of the survivor's own belated sense of knowing, and it is the story that, after the fact, comes to bear witness to the history that has not yet been known.” She contends that trauma survivors frequently suffer from the inability to describe what they have gone through. This battle is profoundly represented in their tales, which are distinguished by gaps, silences, and repeats as individuals grapple with the ineffable nature of their traumatic experiences, according to Caruth.

In addition, Caruth's remarkable understanding of the function of empathy and bearing witness can be observed in the remarks she makes: “The traumatic history of another can suddenly become the traumatic history of the listener”. She proposes that bearing witness to another person's tragedy might operate as a type of catharsis, assisting the survivor in dealing with their own trauma. This component of her theory has been critical in understanding the therapeutic power of storytelling and the need to actively listen to trauma survivors' experiences. In the scenario of Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls*, an in-depth evaluation through

the lens of Caruth's trauma theory would entail investigating how the characters, particularly female characters in the stories react to and cope with their traumatic experiences, how their accounts express the put-off understanding of trauma and the role of narrative and language in their recuperation and healing processes. These accounts would be analyzed for how they represent the delayed comprehension of trauma, which is frequently reflected in Caruth's argument that "the history that has not yet been known" surfaces through storytelling. It would also evaluate the role of empathy and witness in the tales, both in terms of the interactions of the characters and their possible influence on readers.¹⁴

4. Textual Analysis

The thirteen narratives in the compilation of *Scattered Souls* have a fundamental link. Bashir's storytelling abilities are reflected through the narrator's voice carrying the weight of personal memories that serve as the cornerstone of his storylines. Shahnaz Bashir's stories focus on the human toll exacted by the battle, graphically illustrating the long-term effects of the struggle and militarization in Kashmir, with a special emphasis on the agony faced by women. Stories about the trials and tribulations of women take center stage. A good example is the story "Psychosis", which continues the plot from the previous story, "The Ex-Militant". The awful conditions encountered by Sakeena, the wife of former fighter Ghulam Mohiudeen, during her husband's captivity, are shown in the latter.

Sakeena, the narrative's heroine, is sexually assaulted one night in her Srinagar shanty by five men, four of whom are Indian military troops even as "the whole neighbourhood seemed to be alert and listening" and "a contingent of troops cordoned the shanty off". Sakeena's husband, Ghulam Mohiudeen, an "ex-militant" who had "decided to strike out on his own and earn his livelihood by

¹⁴ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1996).

driving an auto rickshaw”, went missing one evening. Sakeena had anticipated his return when the intruders forcibly entered her residence. The men did not let Sakeena go for an hour. ‘Your husband is with us so, take care’, they said while leaving.¹⁵

This agonizing reminiscence manifests through the human presence in the shape of her son, Bilal. She is now caught in a grave quandary, having to confront societal shame and rejection on one hand while rearing her kid born out of wedlock on the other. Sakeena is admitted to the Government Psychiatric Diseases Hospital as a result of PTSD induced by the sexual assault, “the only one of its kind in the valley of Kashmir”, an institution “she has been visiting for the last six years”. During this journey, she nearly loses her state of mind and is forced to seek help from a doctor. Sakeena had already been thrown into upheaval, resulting in her diagnosis of cycloid psychosis and hospitalisation six years prior for “acute onset of confusion, delusions, hallucinations, altered behavior, pan anxiety...with her bleeding, razor-nicked wrists- she had to be literally tied to her bed”.¹⁶

Her mental health and sense of safety deteriorate as a result of the distressing trauma she suffered due to a heinous act of sexual violence. She emphasises that: “The nightmares have become infrequent. Now I don’t see my body rolling down the riverbank. Nor does my bloody shalwaar appear. But the smell of sperm barely leaves me. Even pleasantly scented things smell dirty to me”.

She becomes prey to severe “onset of confusion, delusions, hallucinations, altered behavior, pan anxiety, elation, happiness or ecstasy of high degree, self-blaming and mood swings”. All these excruciating recollections and nightmares stimulate her to commit suicide.

¹⁵ Shahnaz Bashir, *Scattered Souls* (India: Harper Collins Publishers, 2016).

¹⁶ Bashir, *Scattered Souls*.

Even at the hospital, we witness a mother who has been a victim of the struggle, having witnessed her son's death before her eyes. The author argues that no matter where we go, we will come across women who have been directly or indirectly influenced by the issue at hand, which often results in serious emotional and psychological pain. She has to struggle to queue up behind a morose old woman whose son, Sakeena learnt, has been killed in front of her eyes.

Sakeena accepts her widowhood and exposes her heart to the therapist. However, her past continues to haunt her, and despite six years of treatment, Sakeena's pain is not alleviated. Her son, Bilal, is another cause of pain for her since he acts as a continual reminder of that fatal night when he was conceived. The narrative also depicts the maternal emotions and sopiness of Sakeena, who gives birth to Bilal, the rape-born bastard. She tries everything she can to get rid of Bilal, who she thinks "is the human shape of a painful memory". Sakeena's predicament and misery as a woman are emblematic of the worldwide issue of gender subservience and discrimination that women face in a phallocentric environment.¹⁷

The accounts of Sakeena and Bilal display light on the multiple sacrifices that people in the Kashmir Valley are forced to make. Typically, these concessions go unmentioned, having been ingrained in one's everyday life. Half-widows, in particular, live a deeply stressful existence, caught between despair and hope. They are in an even worse condition of being powerless and melancholy-ridden than widows since their lives revolve around a meaningless and never-ending wait. Despite knowing her spouse was dead, Sakeena was hesitant to embark on a new marriage. When the doctor proposes that Sakeena should remarry, she responds, "I can't.... I am still waiting for him".

¹⁷ Bashir, *Scattered Souls*.

The narrative of Sakeena and Bilal further emphasizes the pervasive societal stigma in our culture. Instead of extending empathy to the victims, they are unfairly accused and held responsible for transgressions they did not commit. Sakeena's recurrent nightmares, where her husband Ghulam Mohiudeen implores her to care for their daughter Insha and herself, vividly illustrate the enduring emotional burden borne by individuals in such circumstances.

Bashir has skilfully depicted the horrible sorrow felt by women in occupied Kashmir. The battle has reduced their lives to agony, sorrow, and a loss of basic poise. They are always surrounded by dread and a tremendous sense of impotence in the face of humiliation delivered by law enforcement officials. Sakeena encounters this as she visits an army barrack in quest of information about her missing husband. She is not only chastised but also assaulted by security forces soldiers stationed at the Sonawri camp, despite having bribed the guards with Rs. 5,000 to gain information about her husband. This encounter left her feeling quite embarrassed as “the guards demanded that she sleeps with them. Sakeena left crying”.

Bashir examines the predicament of the lost generations, particularly the conditions that have given rise to Kashmir's half-widows, through Sakeena's tale. These people are dealing with terrible recollections of the past, a horrific present, and an ominous future. Their lives are marked by an abundance of pain, an overpowering sense of hopelessness, and a never-ending tale of humiliation. They live a dreadful existence fraught with severe sorrow that alters their very identities. These half-widows are exposed to cruel torture while searching for their lost spouses. Even their foolish expectations only serve to darken their lives more. They relentlessly pursue answers from numerous sources, only to return empty-handed, with no sign of their loved ones. “There was no such army camp, no interrogation

center, no jail that Sakeena did not knock the doors of while searching for Ghulam Mohiudeen. But she found nothing”.¹⁸

When a household's solitary earner goes missing, the entire family suffers. Circumstances drive the children to assume tasks for which they are unprepared. This familial conflict caused by the loss of the key contributor is addressed further in the narrative “Theft”. Bashir demonstrates the manner in which the loss of the family's lone breadwinner forces incompetent family members who are not yet ready for such duties to participate in menial labour for survival. For more than three decades of strife, Kashmiri women have been subjected to these horrific conditions. The violence in Indian-occupied Kashmir has had a devastating impact on ordinary people, splintering Kashmiri society and shattering families.

In the narrative, Insha grapples with the challenge of determining meaning in her life and asserting her existence amidst societal repression and doubt. This struggle intensifies following her father Ghulam Mohiudeen's disappearance and her mother's ordeal at the hands of law enforcement officers. While working as a salesgirl in a cosmetic shop, Insha faces contempt and humiliation; she is even accused of theft. “For the girl whose father was an ex-militant, whose prematurely aging mother has got *this and that* about herself, whose *brother* is *this and that*. You must know you don't stand a chance. As if it were your fault to be what you are”.

The short story titled “The House” offers an accurate representation of how conflict has the potential to rip apart even the happiest of families. This story, which follows Zareena's life and death, draws emphasis on individuals who are both directly and indirectly touched by the conflict, particularly women. Women in Kashmir frequently lose kids, sons, husbands, fathers and sadly even their own

¹⁸Bashir, *Scattered Souls*.

lives. Women carry the bulk of the burden, regardless of the conditions. Zareena, a simple lady, is described as more virtuous than her husband: “Zareena kept the house lively. Unlike Farooq who wanted the house to be grand yet inhospitable. Zareena would try to draw people in”.¹⁹

A conflict has the capacity to bring down even the most haughty and egotistical people. The breakdown of Farooq Ahmad Mir's family following his wife's terrible death in an army firing incident exemplifies this transition. Zareena died tragically, even though she had done nothing wrong. Her death did not just damage her physical body; it also unconventionally affected her entire home. Despite her loving and welcoming Kashmiri persona, she was ruthlessly murdered. Nevertheless, on a terrible day in May 1999, forces killed her within her own compound: “...but before they could reach the gate, the Army was already inside the compound, furious and desperate. The troops fired indiscriminately and Zareena was hit”.

The passing away of a woman is equivalent to the death of the entire family. Those who have been bereaved or affected create an ensemble of fragmented individuals living in a sense of hollowness. Even the pompous Farooq is severely affected by his wife's death, leaving his enthusiasm for life entirely depleted. Zareena's death caused a split in their family unit: “without Zareena Farooq's family began to disintegrate and he grew more and more lonely, frustrated and deeply forlorn. He missed Zareena and would often stay indoors and cry secretly in her memory”.

In *Scattered Souls*, the sad and disturbing story of Ayesha's tragedy in “The Woman Who Became Her Own Husband” gives a clear picture of how a damaged woman tries to recreate her brighter past. Ayesha and Tariq formerly had a happy

¹⁹ Bashir, *Scattered Souls*.

marriage, referred to by Bashir as an “extraordinary couple,” but the pair's joy was broken when Tariq was tragically killed during an armed forces operation at Residency Road in Srinagar. Ayesha's mental stability declines as a result of this traumatic occurrence, resulting in a psychiatric ailment. As a result, following her husband's death, she begins to mimic his behavior and virtually becomes her own spouse. The story's narrator describes this transformation:

She stood on the verandah, leaning on the railing over the grille the way Tariq did, smoking a cigarette exactly in his style. Standing in the same posture and in the same manner as that of Tariq, she greeted me in a man's tone. Some days later, I saw her hair cut like Tariq's. She paced the verandah, limping like Tariq.

Ayesha's miserable story represents the worldwide tragedy of sorrow, agony, and trauma experienced by the Kashmiri people, particularly women facing continuous occupation and aggression by occupied Indian forces. Her life is continually overshadowed by an existential crisis, leading to psychological pain and odd, unrealistic conduct.

Ayesha never recovers from the trauma, and her departure from Anantnag to Sojourn Khan's apartment is ineffective in terms of her recuperation. She is in a chronic state of mental agony and her state of mind never improves. As the narrator describes it, she becomes a subject of sympathy for everyone:

The ladies in the flat tried their best to keep her indoors because day by day Ayesha was turning into a spectacle for the neighbourhood. Another day I found her dressed in Tariq's navy-blue suit...wearing his pair of brogues, carrying his leather briefcase, limping down the lane for office.²⁰

Bashir skilfully integrates the terrible events of the last two and a half decades into each of the short stories, tragedies that have been firmly etched in Kashmir's collective psyche. Bashir recounts a story that embodies a distinct feeling of optimism through immense agony, sadness, and struggle using this storytelling

²⁰ Bashir, *Scattered Souls*.

method. In some ways, it is like giving a voice to the many voiceless people whose tales have gone unheard, buried behind the flood of reporting on violence and politics emanating from Kashmir.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Shahnaz Bashir's *Scattered Souls* reveals the significant and often disregarded trauma faced by women in the Indian occupied valley of Kashmir. This study explored the pushed-back comprehension and distorted narratives that define the mental and emotional consequences of war through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Bashir's stories serve as an agonizing witness of Kashmiri women's individual and communal suffering, paying attention to their ignored hardships beneath the weight of cultural prejudice and grief.

The tales recounted go beyond Kashmir, compelling us to think about the widespread effect of trauma on people and societies wrapped up in conflict. *Scattered Souls* encourages us to think outside statistics and tabloids and to develop empathetic feelings for people who have been victims of violence and terrorism. As we strive for a world with greater connectivity, these accounts remind us of the critical importance of promoting their voices, recognizing their ability to persevere, and working toward a peaceful future.