

## Trauma and Recovery in Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams*

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### Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the impact of the traumatic experiences on the identity formation of Shaila Abdullah's main character in *Saffron Dreams* and elaborates on how she manages to overcome her diverse emotional burdens. The author, who is concerned with Muslim women's multiple identities and struggles in the American Diaspora, discusses the challenges of living in the increasing Islamophobic climate in the aftermath of 9/11 through the life of her heroine, Arissa Illahi, a Pakistani writer and artist, who loses her husband in the collapse of the World Trade Centre. Judith Herman's conceptions of trauma and recovery are applied to discuss the impact of trauma on the identity formation of the character and how she succeeds to go through the process of healing. The paper also analyzes the literary strategies and narrative techniques in this feminist trauma narrative to indicate how the author has tried to represent what is originally marked by voicelessness. The results of the study demonstrate that although the traumatic event of 9/11 and its consequences has devastating effects on Arissa, she as an artist is able to utilize her psychological resources and to take advantage of familial ties to cope successfully with the traumatic experiences in her life, tolerate adversities, and even develop an optimistic view point about new possibilities for her future life. This paper supports the aim of contemporary feminist traumatology which is to make women's trauma visible, give meaning to it, and ultimately create frameworks that promote the healing of trauma. Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Laurie Vickroy are among the main theoreticians of the research.

### Keywords

Trauma; Recovery; Narrative Techniques; *Saffron Dreams*; Shaila Abdullah.

### 1. Introduction

Nancy Miller proposes "the age of trauma" (11) for current age. The world has seen a large variety of violence and conflict during the last two decades and trauma theory has gained academic status for analyzing literary representations of various forms of

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violence, oppression, and social upheavals. The empirical basis of trauma theory has been mostly in Holocaust and two World War and has disregarded the miseries of less fortunate nations who have been silenced. Radstone observes that, "it is the sufferings of those categorized in the West as other that tend not to be addressed via trauma theory" (25). Stef Craps verifies this notion; "the funding texts of the field (including Caruth's own work) largely fail to live up to the promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement; they marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-western or minority cultures" (46). Feminist trauma critics like Judith Herman and Kaplan express concern about gendering of trauma. Kaplan complains that that the traumas suffered by women like family trauma, the trauma of loss, rejection, betrayal are usually neglected (3). To lead trauma theory away from its Eurocentrism and in order to decolonize trauma studies, emphasis should be placed on narratives that provide insight into phenomena such as slavery, forced immigration, Islamophobia, and racism.

Noted as "Word Artist" by critics, Shaila Abdullah is an award-winning author and designer based in Austin, Texas. Her 2005 debut book, *Beyond the Cayenne Wall* is a collection of short stories about Pakistani women struggling to find their individualities despite the barriers imposed by society. Her award-winning novel *Saffron Dreams* explores the tragedy of 9/11 from the perspective of a Muslim widow. She has also written three children's books— *My Friend Suhana*, *Rani in Search of a Rainbow*, and *A Manual for Marco*. *Saffron Dreams* is the second novel from this Pakistani-American author written in 2009. It is the story of a woman whose life is profoundly shaken after her husband's tragic death in the World Trade Center attacks of 9/11. The event increases the Islamophobic atmosphere and tensions in the US, and Arissa is assaulted by a group of teenagers at a subway station, regarding her as belonging to a "race of murderers" (*Saffron Dreams* 61).

The present article tries to find out the impacts of multiple traumatic experiences on the identity formation of the main character of the novel and how she is reconnected to life and undergoes the process of healing. Trauma in *Saffron Dreams* is traceable in thematic as well as formal levels. In order to imitate the forms and symptoms of the impact of trauma, the novel's narrative style features fragmentation, non-linearity, repetition, poetic prose, and stream of consciousness. This paper proves that the interplay of these techniques helps the reader understand the evasive nature of traumatic experience and engage her or him emotionally with the narrator's story.

## 2. Literature Review

Despite being a very insightful novel, *Saffron Dreams* has not received very extensive attention. Most critical studies about this novel are concerned with the question of the quest for identity from different critical perspectives. Rabia Ashraf in her paper "An Optimistic Evolution of Existence in *Saffron Dreams* by Shaila Abdullah" (2015) studies the psychological metamorphosis of the novel's central character. She analyzes the novel with reference to the theories and ideas of existentialists especially those of Jean Paul Sartre. Exploring the most prominent existential themes such as suffering, solicitude, loneliness, the author concludes that Arissa by making some of the most significant decisions of her life, ultimately faces angst and strong sense of responsibility. Assella Shashikala Muthumal in her PhD dissertation *Contemporary South Asian American Women's Fiction: the "difference"* (2015) critically explores the "difference" of contemporary South Asian American women's fiction and their fictional narratives of women's lives, away from the ethnic postcolonial depictions of diasporic women. The fourth chapter of this dissertation is devoted to Pakistani American women writers, Shaila Abdullah among them. The author argues that the difference in Pakistani American women writer's work lies in their development of individualities beyond stereotypes, while using the same common tropes of coping with family pressure and unforeseen tragedies.

"From Post-colonial to Post-9/11: A Study of the Contemporary Pakistani-American Fiction" (2016) by Muhammad Waqar Azeem employs Giorgio Agamben's notion of "homo sacer" to study the protagonists in three novels by Pakistani writers including *Saffron Dreams*. He contends that the characters represented in the relevant novels respond to the post 9/11 sovereign-law in the US through an act of self-narration and a deliberate exclusion from the dominant narrative of American exceptionalism. Saima Majeed et al. in a research paper entitled "*Saffron Dreams*, a Journey of Evolving Identity" (2017), attempt to find an answer for how the post 9/11 global scenario with its social and political dislocations shapes and fractures protagonists identity formation. The authors also discuss the notions of *other* and *self* in the context of post9/11. Considering the theories of Erik Erikson and Edward Said, they analyze the notion of "social identity" and attribute Arissa's misfortunes to her belonging to a different religion, which make her to be treated as an "outsider" and "inferior" socially, politically, and culturally with respect to the vast majority of the world. It could be claimed that this novel is not analyzed through trauma theory and the reasons for the protagonist's growing out of adversities are not recognized through this critical lens.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. Trauma and Recovery

To Read *Saffron Dreams* within the framework of trauma studies necessitates a quick look at the origin of the theory and its definition. Drawing upon the Freudian model of trauma and the more recent categorization of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), most cultural and literary theorists position trauma as a tardy reaction to an agonizing incident that one cannot fathom. Bond and Craps define it as a “belated response to an overwhelming event too shattering to be processed as it occurs” (4). In this definition, obviously, the words *belated* and *overwhelming* are considered as significant features of traumatic experience; thus, it can be inferred that because the traumatic event is very devastating it cannot be unraveled on the spot and is consequently delayed. Not surprisingly the delay in dealing with trauma occurs in memory and the excessive pain or agony in the traumatic situation disrupts the memory’s function so that the traumatic incident “could not be assimilated at the time of its occurrence and only belatedly in its insistent and intrusive return” (Wolfreys 132). Accordingly, the response to traumatic events occurs sometime after the event.

The difficulty of integrating traumatic experience into memory due to its ‘overwhelming’ nature affects its retrieval. The traumatized subject is unable to process the event as it occurred; the interrelationship and sequence of events are disrupted and only fragmented images or excited senses are preserved. Luckhurst emphasizes the inaccessibility of the traumatic memories and the metamorphosis they undergo in the process of revival. He verbalizes this process as follows, “traumatic memories are repressed as they are formed, leaving them unavailable to conscious recall; subsequently, they recur in various displaced ways, as hallucinations, flashbacks, or nightmares” (3). Put differently, due to the enormity of the traumatic experience, the unconscious tends to repress it; hence it has to get transformed in order to find some outlet in the conscious mind.

Bond and Craps accentuate the indefinability of trauma by using the term “slippery” They go on to define it as “blurring the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence. It traverses the internal and external, the private and the collective” (5). The fluctuation they refer to can explain the difficulty a traumatized subject experience in diagnosing and healing the source of her/his distress. As Bohleber informs, trauma can be a permanent experience with unforeseen durability: “Trauma, and being overwhelmed by its remembrance, was not only a concern for the surviving victims, but also had specific consequence for their children and children’s children” (102).

Apart from the scholars who stress on the difficulty or even the impossibility of the healing of trauma due to its repeated and overwhelming nature, Judith Herman in her *Trauma and Recovery*, appoints three stages for the complex and risky process of healing. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life (110). She goes on to elaborate the significance of each step. The acutely traumatized person needs a safe refuge. Establishing the survivor's safety begins by focusing on the control of the body and gradually moves toward the control of the environment. After management of "posttraumatic symptoms", the establishment of environmental issues including the establishment of a safe living situation is prioritized (124).

In the second stage, the survivor tells the story of the trauma. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the "traumatic memory" into the survivor's life story (125). Herman considers reconstructing the traumatic event and mourning very crucial steps in healing process, she maintains that, "out of the fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation, patient and therapist slowly reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context" (126). As the recitations of facts related to traumatic experience could be unbearable, "the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing and painting" (126).

Reconnection with ordinary life is the third stage in Herman's recovery theory; "having come to terms with the traumatic past, the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She has mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed, now she must to develop a new self" (141). Communicating effectively with people in the society is called "concrete step" by Herman which increase the survivor's "sense of power and control" and makes her "control, protect herself against future danger, and to deepen her alliances with those whom she has learnt to trust" (41). The promising and nevertheless cautious remarks of this critic is an optimistic turn in trauma theory which alludes to the possibility of healing even on people who have undergone through the overwhelming experience of trauma.

### **3.2. The Aesthetics of Trauma**

Since the 1990s, a group of scholars including Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman has examined the concept of trauma and its role in literature. In her pioneering study of literary trauma entitled, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, Cathy Caruth suggests "trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language"

(3). She goes on to elaborate on this "insolvability" by stating: "trauma is an injury to the psyche that language often fails to adequately represent or express. Trauma is both highly resistant to articulation and wildly generative of narratives that seek to explicate the 'unclaimed' ordinary experience" (76). The paradox of resisting articulation on the one hand and generating narrative on the other is exactly the focal point that literary studies, including the present article, try to elucidate.

Other critics have pointed to the same difficulty in representing the traumatic experiences; Ronell (declares that, "trauma can be experienced in at least two ways....as a memory that one cannot integrate into one's own experience; and as a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to the others" (313). The unrepresentability of trauma experience poses a paradox or contradiction; the paradox of having to remember and being unable to communicate what you remember. Anne whitehead acknowledges such a paradox and asks, "if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction" (3)? Whitehead provides an answer for this contradiction in her *Trauma Fiction*, pointing out that, "trauma fiction overlaps with and borrows from both postmodern and postcolonial fiction in its self-conscious deployment of stylistic devices as modes of reflection or critique" (14). In this fashion the solution to fill the gap between memory and its expression could be traced mostly on the level of form rather than content, i.e., stylistic measures of narrative techniques.

Laurie Vickroy attests the above-mentioned claim and defines trauma narratives as narratives that "go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works" (24). Vickroy's emphasis on the "structure" is further explained by Caruth. She suggests that "if trauma is at all susceptible to narrative formulation, then it requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence" (13). These critics advocate departure from conventional and realistic mode of narration and experimentation with innovative narrative techniques for the communication of traumatic experience.

The representation of the trauma experience, a psychological event which is originally marked by unrepresentability and voicelessness, requires structures and techniques that may communicate the unspeakable. Whitehead identifies the characteristics of literary imitation of trauma experiences, which can be found within fictional trauma representation; she maintains that, "Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only be adequately represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (4). Therefore, the shattering of the

chronological order can be regarded as the primary narrative technique in trauma literature. Jullian Wolfreys, also refers to the same mechanisms in writing or reading trauma narratives: "to read trauma is to register the sign of a second experience and recognition of the return of something spectral in the form of a trace or sign signifying, but not representing directly, that something having occurred, has left its mark, an inscription of sorts on the subject's unconscious, ... and does return repeatedly" (133). In other words, lack of directness is an indispensable feature of trauma narratives. Perhaps dissimulation and disguise are two terms which can define the ghostly quality of trauma literature very well.

These critics have all stressed the inexpressible experience of trauma and the movement of structural repetition. Repetition is also a key term which is inseparable from trauma experience. As Slavoj Žižek avers, "there is an inherent link between the notions of trauma and repetition, signaled in Freud's well-known motto that what one is not able to remember, one is condemned to repeat...as such, it repeats itself indefinitely, returning to haunt the subject" (37). Moran draws attention to the somatic, as opposed to linguistic, aspect of memory and maintains that, "traumatic events persist as preverbal 'body memories' that resist narration; they recur as incomprehensible and intrusive memory fragments that are almost hallucinatory in their intensity" (8). This lack of verbal competence is acknowledged by Herman as well: "The excessive arousal of emotions in trauma victims leaves them almost mute. These memories remain "wordless and static" (175). Indeed, as Herman carries on the trauma story is "pre-narrative, it does not develop or progress in time, and it does not reveal the story teller's feelings or interpretation of events" (176). The defiance of the conventional narrative time lines leads to another stylistic feature in the genre. Trauma stories instead feature "Fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation" (47). As mentioned before, trauma involves an enigma; a relentless desire to repeat the traumatic memory and the impossibility of communicating it to others. Due to the so called unspeakable, unrepresentable nature of traumatic experience "trauma theory is forced to engage with the paradox of the incommensurability and impossibility of language and representation in relation to trauma on the one hand, and the desperate need for means of expression on the other" (14). Modernist and postmodernist narrative techniques are suitable choices for representing the unrepresentable traumatic experience.

It seems that "trauma aesthetics correspond with the modernist and postmodernist turn in critical theory towards fragmentation, a decentered self, non-linearity, and stream of consciousness" (qtd. in Moran 16). Corresponding to the ruptured and disorganized memory of the traumatized subject, trauma literature reflects the same

tendency: "Following trauma theory, trauma fiction thus largely privileges narrative rupture as the only proper work of a trauma aesthetic" (Luckhurst 89). Following the nature of traumatic memory which is fragmented, "the trauma aesthetic is uncompromisingly avant-garde: experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions" (81). As a consequence, instead of representing trauma in literature, the unrepresentability of the experience is depicted through stylistic methods. "Trauma victims have often been observed to recount their experiences in incoherent and fragmented narrative; it is due to the excessive arousal in a traumatic situation [that] significantly alters processes of encoding, storing, and later consolidating a memory and its recall" (Bohleber 129). That means, the scar that is imprinted on the psyche by the unexpectedness and severity of traumatic experience fragments memory and hence linguistic representation.

The chronological temporality of the linear narrative dominant in realistic novels allows the reader to create an organized sense of time, while trauma survivors often "report feeling that time is standing still" (Bohleber 97). In trauma narratives, such a disturbance in the sense of time is shown in the flashbacks and repetition in which the past and present are hardly distinguishable. These techniques aim to mirror the distorted perception of time. The affliction the traumatized subjects undergo cannot be traced in what they recount; rather, their distress must be diagnosed in how they narrate the suffering.

#### **4. Discussion**

Dori Laub assigns the phrase "an event without a voice" to the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and claims that, "September 11 was an encounter with something that make no sense, an event that fits nowhere. It was an experience of collective massive psychic trauma. Nearly six months after the event that shook our world and our assumption about our lives, there is no coherent narrative about September 11. This too, is the nature of massive collective trauma" (204). The voicelessness of the traumatic experience implies the difficulty of expressing due to its drastic effects on a large number of people. However, the necessity of narrating trauma in healing process is accentuated by trauma theorists. It seems that more than being "an event without a voice" it is an event with multiple ununified voices and many different accounts of what happened. One of these voices belong to the author of *Saffron Dreams* who attempts to recount the drastic effects of that massive collective trauma on a Muslim woman character. Shaila Abdullah gives voice to a female Muslim character, culturally and ethnically different, who tries to tell her story of 9/11 trauma.

Some fictional works written in twenty-first century incorporate 9/11 in to their narrative, like Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, Safron Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. These authors try to represent the psychological effects of that catastrophe "where feelings, conflicting emotions, and moral dilemmas emerge to reveal the human dimension of the story" (Martin 273). In addition to American authors, there are also novels written by authors from other parts of the world, a fact that illustrates the transcultural dimension of the catastrophe. Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dream* deals with the same themes, taking into account the drastic effects of loss on its heroine and probing the overwhelming consequences of terror. However, this novel is narrated from the perspective of Muslim Other who is herself the victim of disaster.

Abdullah exposes the unpredictability of life in *Saffron Dreams*; amidst the sweetest moments of life a horrific event destroys everything. Arissa discovers in a single moment that "no matter how carefully you map your life, it is life itself that choose your destiny" (*Saffron Dreams* 45). The collapse of world Trade Centre where Faizan works interrupts Arissa's life and dreams. Her first reaction is that of denial and paralysis of mind. Then she gradually slides down into the states of helplessness and surrender. Laplanche and Pontalis characterize trauma "by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization." (Qtd. in Hwangbo 20). To put it differently, the severity of traumatic experience disables the traumatized subject; moreover, it has durable disturbing effects on the psychic structure.

Herman identifies the repetition of trauma in the survivor's fantasy life and the restriction of imagination by a sense of helplessness and futility as the earlier stages of traumatization (145). The drastic effect of the event is registered in Arissa's mind; "When I close my eyes and think back, I still see and feel the smoke and ashes falling over my head in giant loads, trapping me below, and I open my eyes just to block those images out. But even then, I can't stop seeing the woman who'd paused near me and nodded a silent admission of our loss" (32). The scene of her helplessness in finding Faizan amid the ash and debris haunts Arissa as the involuntary repetition is a dominant feature of traumatic memory. Cathy Caruth, asserts, "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4). Later on, the image of the towers haunts Arissa's thought and dreams; "don't they know that even towers who flirt the sky can come down? That steel and concrete can become the rubble of future and dreams can be destroyed in a heart-stopping second" (*Saffron Dreams* 43)? In Arissa's narrative voice, the words absence and void turn into motifs describing her mental and psychic states; "How do you fill a void? Kill an emptiness" (39)? Balaev considers the

unspeakable void as the “dominant concept in criticism for imagining trauma’s function in literature” (1). Debilitating sense of loss and absence dominates her wounded psyche and narrative alike.

Trauma in *Saffron Dreams* is traceable in thematic as well as formal levels. The representation of the experience of trauma, psychological event which is originally marked by unrepresentability and voicelessness, requires structures and techniques that may communicate the unspeakable. Whitehead identifies the characteristics of literary imitation of trauma experiences, which can be found within fictional trauma representation; she maintains that, “Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only be adequately represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection” (4). Therefore, the shattering of the chronological order can be regarded as the primary narrative technique in trauma literature. The chronological temporality of linear narrative dominate in realistic novels allows the reader to create an organized sense of time, while trauma survivors often “report feeling that time is standing still” (97). In trauma narratives, such a disturbance in the sense of time is shown in the flashbacks and repetition in which past and present are hardly distinguishable. These techniques aim to mirror the distorted perception of time.

Abdullah utilizes narrative strategies like non-linearity, stream of consciousness, and repeated imagery to imitate the symptoms of traumatic memory. Bohleber considers incoherency and fragmentation as the structural feature of survival’s narrative; “it is due to the excessive arousal in a traumatic situation [that] significantly alters processes of encoding, storing, and later consolidating a memory and its recall” (129). That means, the scar that is imprinted on the psyche by the unexpectedness and severity of traumatic experience fragments memory and hence linguistic representation. *Saffron Dreams* is told in the style of memoir in which the first-person narrator, Arissa Illahi, shares with readers her thoughts and life events. At the beginning of each chapter, the date and place are marked out. The first chapter dates November 2001, early after the collapse of the world trade center; a gloomy pregnant mother is going to bid farewell to her *hijab*. Then there is flash-forward to October 2006, the present time for the characters in the novel. In the third chapter there is flashback to past, May 1989, the time Arissa lived in Karachi as a teenager. The nonlinearity is also could be explored in every single paragraph of the novel in which the narrator oscillates between past and present and her thoughts wanders among many different topics.

Forter considers “a profound psychic disorientation” and “the deformation or eclipse of memory” (71) as the major symptoms of trauma experience. He maintains

that in order to imitate the impacts of trauma in fiction and to transmit the experience to readers, there must be “a break in linear, conventional narrative representation” (71). *Saffron Dreams* is based on the memory of a trauma victim who ponders over the events of her life and their meanings. Immediately after Faizan’s fateful outcome in New York trade centre, Arissa thinks of a beggar woman they met in Karachi. The strange woman with her prophecy about Faizan’s death intrudes to haunt Arissa’s mind. She alerted them to the misfortune in their fate, “Giant flames will be his blanket one day. Tantalizing, scorching flames will chase him...he will dance with fire one day...she didn’t ask for money, I remember thinking ... the event found its way into one of my compositions much later. But then, the fire dance was long over” (*Saffron Dreams* 49-50). The reader follows the flow of her thoughts which are by no means straightforward rather they are represented in “achronological memorial shards (flashbacks, nightmares, image traces)” (Forster 72). The juxtaposition of past with present in this novel proves that Arissa is haunted by the traumatic event. The images and sensations related to that experience intrude to haunt her memory and narrative alike.

Replicating the experience of thinking through stream of consciousness allows the reader to enter the mind of traumatized character of the novel and get access to her mental process. Abrams defines stream of consciousness as “the full spectrum and the continuous flow of a character’s mental process” (202), that may act as a window to the interior world of the characters. Balaev believes that “the use of stream of consciousness to describe the traumatic experience is to create a dissociating effect” (135). The senses of dissociation and aloofness are among the prominent symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder which could be perceived by this narrative technique. The flow of Arissa’s thoughts in this short paragraph could be considered as an example, “I handed half a sandwich to Ma from inside my bag. She took a bite and looked at it. It was a simple sandwich that echoed our lives...with regret, I saw the crisp fallen leaves on the ground. They will never find his body now, I thought randomly. Too much has passed” (*Saffron Dreams* 89). The fallen leaves on the ground are associated with the death of Faizan. McNally believes that “Rather than merely remembering the trauma, sufferers seemed to relive it again and again as if it were happening in the present” (8). The tragic death of Faizan reverberates in her mind and she cannot escape from it even years after the event.

Trauma disables the normal function of the memory; hence it affects the process of remembering and retrieval; the traumatized person becomes “possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 5) as she cannot “integrate the traumatic experience into consciousness. Memories and their associated feelings are therefore dissociated from

conscious awareness and control of the self" (Bohleber 131). To put it differently, trauma subjects cannot recall the traumatic incidents or even if they can remember them; their memory tends to consist of fragmentary bits or spots rather than a complete whole. The itinerary image of fire and the colors related to it preoccupy Arissa's mind which are reflected in both her narration and painting.

The brush in Arissa's hand apparently has a magical quality of painting on its own, which verifies the lack of control in the trauma sufferers, proposed by Bohleber. The subject of painting with sad and dull colors reflects the gloomy mood of the painter. The colors which all blend in black signify her attempt to hide herself and take refuge in the world of amnesia. Her failure to do so is shown in the picture of twin towers which stubbornly resist to be hid by the last stroke of the brush. The intrusive and involuntary nature of trauma experience haunts the artist's imagination and forces her to paint what brings about the feelings of fear and guilt in her. Bohleber elaborates on the sudden intrusion of traumatic memories which are triggered by stimuli connected to trauma or sudden entrance of conflicted thoughts associated with the traumatic event which is overwhelming and often shocking and can reduce the ego to a state of passive helplessness. The patient feels imprisoned, or fears further fragmentation of the self (130). Arissa thinks that she is stuck, unable to move as if the picture of the towers in fire has hypnotized her. She looks at the picture with mad fixation as if haunted and possessed by the picture he has just painted.

Trauma theorists including Herman acknowledge the importance of proper mourning in facilitating the recovery process. The survivors of 9/11 attacks who could not find their loved one's bodies would suffer from what Pauline Boss calls "ambiguous loss" (555). Arissa thinks how Faizan left her and the world without a trace; "lit in flames, lost like a firecracker. Not a cry. Not a sign. Vanished, like he never existed" (*Saffron Dreams* 78). Since his body is never found, Faizan is denied a proper mourning ritual which brings about enhanced psychological burden in Arissa. Boss contends that "the traumas surrounding 9/11 are so devastating to many because ambiguous loss defies psychological closure, simply because the families are never sure whether or not their loved ones has died and because they do not have a body to mourn" (552). The normal process of adapting emotionally and mentally to death was prolonged in Arissa due to the event's unexpected and traumatic nature; the harsh and illogical response of the community and media who failed to regard her as a victim aggravated her condition. Thus, Arissa's need but failure to mourn properly for her losses entraps her in the traumatic process for a good deal of time.

Abdullah's protagonist is, however, capable of upholding her relations and connections with life. "Some trauma survivors cope well and do not experience a

disruption in functioning. Many individuals show an ability to move beyond the traumatic stressor with little or no distress" (Bonanno 140). Arissa's recovery process could be explored in the effect of social support she obtains from her parents-in-law, her own personality as an artist, the discovery of her dead husband's manuscript and her intention to complete it, and may be the necessities of her physically and mentally disabled child as a distracting factor. Judith Herman underlines the effect of social support in healing as she believes that people in the Survivor's social world have the power to influence the eventual outcome of the trauma. She contends that, "a supportive response from other people may mitigate the impact of the event, while a negative or hostile response may compound the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome" (44).

Vickroy refers to the double-edge effect of social factor in healing or hindering the process of healing in trauma sufferers, "the social environment influences the causes and outcomes of traumatic experience in a variety of ways. It not only forms the circumstances out of which trauma is created, but can also provide or refuse the needed support for healing" (132). Although the American community failed to acknowledge her trauma and her status as a survivor and victim of 9/11 was denied, her parents-in-law embraced Arissa in their warm, protective arms.

The fragmented and shattered self of Arissa is formed and sustained in relation with Ma and Baba, the way she calls her parents-in-law. The first-person narrator informs the reader that, "the days after Faizan's death were a blur to me. Relatives and friends from all over had gathered to help and support me, overwhelming at times and much needed at others. Then, like fall, they started to disappear leaf by leaf, going on with their own lives and work, until two remained: Ma and Baba" (*Saffron Dreams* 87). Ma and Baba through their constant care and sympathy reconnect Arissa with life and encourage her to continue. Arissa remembers, "Ma came to me in each morning with a cup of steaming tea and helped me sit up, forcing me to face the new day...she would draw the curtain and sit next to me and encourage me to talk" (57). Although they are mourning for the loss of their only son, considering Arissa's delicate condition, as a pregnant mother, they hide it.

Ma insists Arissa to fulfill her son's dream by finishing his novel, *Soul Searcher*. The project reintegrates both women with life. Kirby Farrell argues that depending on how people manage their responses, tragic or traumatic events can be a means of creating a bond among them. Furthermore, he also points out that social support and controls often help people tame the pain and horror they experience and deal more effectively with the tragedy that has befallen them (18). Arissa is surprised by the passion in her mother-in-law's voice and she notes that, "it was as if for days she had

been losing herself piece by piece and had just realized how to put herself back together again" (92). Trauma theorists have acknowledged the "dissociating" effect of trauma. Dominick LaCapra defines trauma as "a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (41). The fragmented self of Ma seems to be integrable with the dim hope of finishing her son's novel. The decision reconnects both women with life and inspires the hope of recovery in them; "without voicing it, we knew Ma had won that round. We embraced and held each other. We had no more tears left...This was our closure as well as our new beginning. Together, we would create a lasting legacy for Faizan. She with her selfless support, me with my pen (*Saffron Dreams* 102). The women learn to compensate for their losses, to reduce the disturbing effects of the trauma in their existence by mutual understanding and sympathy.

Herman suggests "scriptotherapy" to reconstruct the subject after trauma; by integrating traumatic memories into narrative one, the traumatized subject is able to remake the self from the scattered shards of disrupted memory (27). The general understanding behind the term, according to Stephen Lepore and Joshua Smyth, is that "identification, exploration, and expression of stress-related thoughts and feelings helps relieve ailments associated with traumatic experiences" (3) in the victim. Stemming from the Latin roots (*scriptum* meaning "thing written" and *therapia* meaning "to nurse or cure"), scriptotherapy was coined by Suzette Henke in *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. For Henke, "scriptotherapy is a discursive space within which all the psychological wounds one suffers from are re-enacted with the purpose of making them heal" (4). Writing serves as an instrument in the process of healing. Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* hints to the significance of verbalizing adversities, "Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways" (43). Writing as a powerful medium is suggested by these scholars to allow the resolution or reconfiguration of the most emotionally distressing experiences. Bessel and McFarlane warn against the resistance to articulate trauma in these terms; "If the traumatized do not put their past cataclysmic experiences into perspective by narrative in order to integrate and accept them as part of their lives, they will remain in the "black hole" of trauma that saps the life out of them by fixating them on trauma" (124). Despite the elusive nature of traumatic experience, the traumatized subject has to incorporate the event in her narrative memory by trying to express it. Narrative mediation is one major form of what Dori Laub calls the "re-externalization" and "historicization" of the traumatic incident, which is necessary for "undoing [survivors'] entrapment" (69) in the troubling past.

The project of finishing novel gives an opportunity to Arissa to integrate the traumatic incident into her life and to pick and stick the broken pieces of her traumatized self. According to Hartman, “verbalizing the experience of suffering is a crucial step to traumatized person’s recovery process” (259). It could be understood that the recovery process begins when the traumatized subject is able to transform traumatic events into a logical and coherent narrative. The brilliant idea of rewriting the novel from a different narrative point of view helps Arissa to surmount the “difficulty of regaining one’s voice, one’s subjectivity, after one has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or worse made into someone else’s speech, the medium of another’s agency” (Laub 69). The traumatic event has rendered Arissa ‘silent’, ‘voiceless’, once she decides to write the novel “in the voice of another” (*Saffron Dreams* 54), she recaptures her subjectivity as a writer and an artist; “my fingers had a life of their own as they typed. I was amazed at what happened on the screen in front of me. I was giddy with the power that words gave to me” (62). Arissa’s commitment to finish the novel sustains her emotional balance and reclaims her voice. Afterwards she feels that she “had paid [her] respect to the lifework of a man” (47).

Arissa is an artist, she has a sense of colors, when words fail to articulate her grief, she takes refuge in the world of painting and colors. To fill the gap between memory and its expression, she switches to nonverbal method of communication. Painting creates a safe space for her to express painful feelings. The lack of verbal competence is acknowledged by Herman as well: “The excessive arousal of emotions in trauma victims leaves them almost mute. These memories remain wordless and static” (175). However, the necessity of expressing the feelings of grief in the recovery process is confirmed; for example, Adorno in “Commitment” praises art for its beneficial effects, “it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it” (318). Not only do artistic manifestations represent traumatic experience but also improves a person’s physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Arissa’s painting subjects after the trauma harbor on the fire images, for instance “a beggar woman engaged in a bloody fight with a little boy, fire dancing in her eyes” (*Saffron Dreams* 83). Her subject matters invoke disturbing feelings, “red magnolias oozing blood instead of nectar, a man in his last dying moments with his killer, a mother holding a dead infant” (83). Herman emphasizes on the frozen and wordless quality of traumatic memories, she declares that, “traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images...often one particular set of images crystallizes the experience in the ‘ultimate horror’. “The intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context, gives traumatic memory a heightened reality” (27). The

dominant images of fire, blood, and death mirror the agony of her traumatized mind which could also act as a powerful medium to releases emotional pain. These paintings as the "sign of emerging memory" (Vickroy 133), expresses her unresolved grief and help her to extricate herself from their intrusive and disturbing effects.

Painting as a healthy outlet for expressing and releasing traumatic feelings in the protagonist of Abdullah proves to reintegrate her traumatically shattered self. After painting a picture which is supposed to be the cover of Faizan's novel she feels lightheaded in a fulfilled kind of way; "I worked diligently and furiously as the hours ticked away...I stepped back in satisfaction and studied the orange sky on the canvas, the color of saffron, just how Faizan had wanted it...Tomorrow, I will paint the two boys, the stigmas of saffron, I decided. That would be the cover of soul searcher" (8). Arissa thinks she has paid her respect to the life work of her deceased husband. She finds comfort in art's ability to take her outside her personal struggles and refocus her attention to positive sensations of exploration and accomplishments.

Arissa's physically and mentally handicapped child with his ever-increasing demands unexpectedly provides Arissa a level of distraction from her grief. She focuses her attention on this child's slow and tardy progress. Arissa thinks that a normal child might not have been able to give her such distraction from distress since she thinks her life "fell into a single-minded routine, milestones measured by Raian's accomplishments" (112). Developing her handicapped child's aptitudes and abilities and lessen his dependency and frustration turn to be her focal purpose in life. Even, early after the most disastrous event in her life she decides, "I needed to face this brutal life, not for me but for the little person inside me who would feed off my courage" (34). Arissa as a mother is able to understand and recognize her significant role as a solo parent. "Posttraumatic growth" has been defined as the phenomenon of positive personal change after devastating events by Tedeschi & Calhoun. Posttraumatic growth may support the vital function of meaning making that can contribute to the healing process, and a survivor's attempt to find meaning can be an important mediator of the effect of trauma (455). Arissa grows through the adversities she confronts in her life when she discovers a greater sense of purpose and meaning in bringing up a physically and mentally challenged child.

Although the new twist in Ariss's life had disrupted her balance, her personality as a planner makes her rearrange her life after the hurricane of loss and separation. She asserts, "the truth is I am a planner" (66). She has set and listed several goals for her life; "at home I checked the item "lost veil" off my list and studied the next two entries. 'Move', scrawled beneath it in just the few weeks was the last entry, 'complete *Soul Searcher*'" (80). Herman considers 'reconnection' as the third stage in the healing

process and maintains that, "Having come to terms with the traumatic past, the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She has mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self" (141). In other words, the trauma survivor learns to gain control of her life and set plans for her future as she is not in the

Arissa gets a job as an interviewer; this opportunity not only reassures her future life, but also provides her new connections and social relationships. She eventually understands that healing does not begin with forgetting, "healing is achieved by dedicating yourself to certain causes ... that, there is no help in shy away and distance" (*Saffron Dreams* 56). 'Disconnection' and 'disempowerment' are the direct consequences of trauma. Therefore, recovery is "based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections" (Herman 94). Eventually the traumatized character of the novel understands recovery is not to be expected to take place in isolation. Herman distinguishes three main stages in the recovery from trauma: "safety," "remembrance and mourning" and "reconnection with ordinary life" (155). Employment provides for her a new network of social connections and gives her an opportunity to succumb to the pain of loss by reconnecting with ordinary life. She notes that, "Getting used to the noisy pace of Chamak was easy. The crew was supportive, team-spirited, and made me feel right at home...the work helped alleviate some of my anxiety over the future" (*Saffron Dreams* 124). In her renewed connection with her colleagues, Arissa reconnects with life and surmounts the feelings of grief, guilt, and anxiety.

Arissa, once was obsessed with the thoughts of interrupted life and unfulfilled dreams, and lamented that; "no matter how carefully you map your life, it is life itself that choose your destiny" (*Saffron Dreams* 45). However, after a prolonged struggle with herself, she comes to terms with the limitations of human life. Herman calls this capacity 'integrity' which involves affirming the value of life in the face of death and reconciling with the infinite limits of one's own life and the tragic limitations of the human condition. She also believes that accepting those realities without despair is a significant factor in alleviating the healing process (108-109). Arissa tackles through the biggest loss of her life by utilizing all her emotional and mental abilities.

## **5. Conclusion**

The core concern of this study was to examine trauma in connection with identity and how the female character responds to the event and the way she transforms from the event. As the study shows, the story of Arrisa's trauma is the story of the haunting of the unacknowledged loss and grief. In trauma, not only is the past inextricably entwined with the present but it also repeatedly intrudes upon the present with

persistent force, stopping the progression of time and locking the survivor into the perpetual reliving of the earlier moments of terror and agony. Since trauma involves unwanted remembrance of painful experiences, it affects the traumatized subject's identity and perception. Trauma critics, as it was reviewed, underline the shattering and disrupting influence of trauma on memory and identity formation. *Saffron Dreams* also conveys the theme of trauma on formal level by utilizing narrative strategies that attest the fragmented, nonlinear and sensory-based nature of traumatic experiences. The research shows that although trauma is marked by unrepresentability and silence stated by the major theoreticians of the field, it can be tracked through literary strategies and narrative techniques like non-linearity, poetic prose, repetition, and stream of consciousness.

Considering Herman's conception of recovery, the study showed that the main female character of *Saffron Dreams* manages to reduce the adverse effects of trauma and even grow mentally and spiritually out of the ashes of the catastrophe. Among the many factors related to the positive transformation in Arissa is the 'outer' and 'inner' reliance which facilitates her healing process. After being exposed to highly disruptive events in her life, including the death of her husband in the collapse of the world trade centre, being the target of Islamophobic hatred and violence, being harassed and labeled by media and ordinary people for her Muslim identity, the failure of American society to recognize her as the victim of 9/11 trauma, and finally parenting a physically and mentally handicapped child, Arissa, as an artist and a writer, is able to utilize her psychological resources and to take advantage of familial ties to cope successfully with the traumatic experiences in her life, tolerate adversities, and even develop an optimistic view point about new possibilities for her future life. Actually, Arissa like a phoenix rises out of ashes.

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