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Manuscript 1018

Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature

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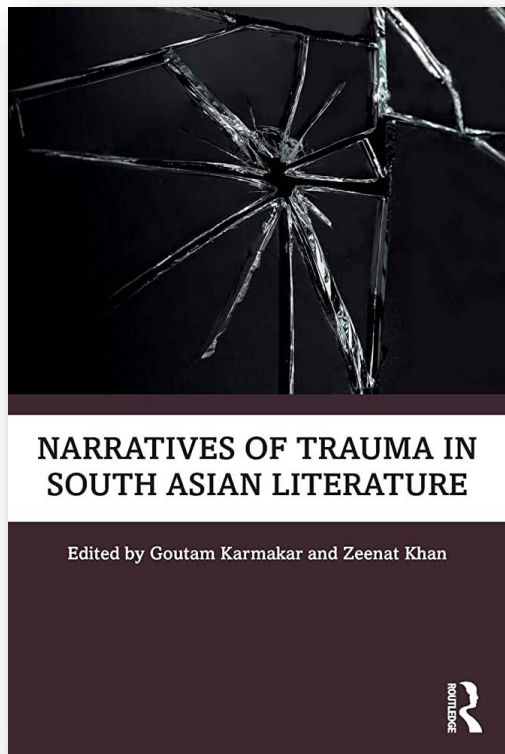
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Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature

Edited by Goutam Karmakar & Zeenat Khan



Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature, ed. Goutam Karmakar and Zeenat Khan. New York: Routledge, 2023. ISBN 9781032405353, 294 pages.

The Introduction to editors Goutam Karmakar and Zeenat Khan's wide-ranging essay collection, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, succinctly sums up the problem that the volume seeks to address: "postcolonial critics have argued for some time that trauma theory has not lived up to its promise of cross-cultural altruistic interactions. Instead of forming empathy and cohesiveness with non-Western others, a stringent-

ly Western canon of trauma literature has evolved, privileging the suffering of white Europeans while ignoring the uniqueness of non-Western and minority ethnic traumatic experiences."¹ *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature* uses seven geographically-focused clusters of essays to elucidate the ways in which the interdisciplinary field of trauma studies allows for a delineation of the cultural and historical specificity of South Asian narratives of trauma. These essays simultaneously serve as a means for connecting South Asian literary accounts of individual and collective trauma to broader national and transnational dynamics.

For scholars of South Asian Literature, postcolonial studies, and trauma studies alike, this is a valuable volume. In addition to setting up the volume as a corrective to the Eurocentrism of existing work in trauma studies, Karmakar and Khan's Introduction outlines two histories germane to trauma and trauma studies. The first of these histories is a broad strokes account of (Western) thought about trauma, focusing in particular on the transformations in understandings of trauma in the wake of two

¹ Goutam Karmakar and Zeenat Khan, "Introduction: Literary Trauma Theory and South Asian Literature," in *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, ed. Goutam Karmakar and Zeenat Khan (New York: Routledge, 2023), 7.

of (Western) modernity's signal features: nineteenth-century industrialization and the two World Wars of the twentieth century. Transformed from an earlier understanding of trauma as solely physical in nature, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created conditions that produced and highlighted the "strikingly psychological and social aspects" of trauma.² Perhaps even more valuable than this broad picture of (Western) understandings of trauma is the Introduction's account of scholarly understandings of the concept across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While foundational work such as Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) argues for an account of trauma as, in essence, the Lacanian "Real" that never can be fully or faithfully articulated in language, more recent work by scholars including Michelle Balaev (author of *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels* (2012)) reconceptualizes trauma as eminently representable within the confines of cultural and literary norms for representing traumatic experience. "Previously considered unutterable and indecipherable," write Karmakar and Khan, "trauma is now recognized as something that can be spoken about and conveyed, albeit at its own tempo."³ What is sketched out for readers in this Introduction is a sense of trauma studies as a field that, in a seeming paradox, achieves greater claim to "universal" explanatory power the more it focuses on the cultural and historical forces that inform discrete experiences of trauma. By trading the sometimes ahistorical psychoanalytic lens (a charge that has been lev-

eled against psychoanalytic criticism by, among others, Mikhail Bakhtin and fellow Russian Formalists) for the more culturally-specific approaches forwarded by scholars like those included in Balaev's 2014 essay collection, *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory, Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature* seeks to decolonize trauma studies by making the field at once more inclusive and less captivated by the psychoanalytic and European reference points that continue to center many humanistic and interdisciplinary fields. What this decolonized trauma studies seeks to do is to "modify the theories and models of trauma for the better and highlight commonalities and contrasts in psychic experiences and responses across the globe."⁴

Part I of the volume, "Partition and Beyond: Narrating Trauma of India," features essays by Nalini Iyer, co-editor Zeenat Khan, and Manjot Kaur that focus on the work of Indian authors Perumal Murugan, Siddhartha Gigoo, Mirza Waheed, Shahnaz Bashir, and Amandeep Sandhu. Iyer's essay analyzes Perumal Murugan's fiction as "vernacular postcolonialism" in order to scale our attention down from events like Partition and the Covid-19 pandemic in their totality to "the regional and local in contemporary India and the social structures that engender multigenerational gendered trauma within families."⁵ Iyer's focus on gendered trauma looks forward to a number of other essays in the volume that approach South Asian

² Karmakar and Khan, "Introduction," 1.

³ Karmakar and Khan, "Introduction," 6.

⁴ Karmakar and Khan, "Introduction," 9.

⁵ Nalini Iyer, "Trauma, Gender, and Caste: Vernacular Postcolonial Feminism and the Writing of Perumal Murugan," in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 25, 24.

trauma narratives with a nuanced sense of the critical and ethical responsibilities that come along with writing about women's lives within the varied cultural contexts of South Asia. Of particular note for scholars interested in South Asian feminisms and allied movements is Iyer's notion that Murugan's novel *One Part Woman* articulates "a postcolonial vernacular feminism."⁶ Khan's essay, focused on contemporary fiction from the Kashmir region of India, engages in the volume's decolonizing aims by "map[ping] the circularity of grief, where pathogenic memories of the traumatic events and everyday witnessing of the trauma continuously remain in flux and thus simultaneously erode the individual and collective consciousness of the people" of Kashmir.⁷ In line with the volume's theoretical and analytical commitments, Khan's essay understands trauma in the Kashmir region as simultaneously personal and communal and, moreover, reads trauma as inseparable from geographical, cultural, and historical particularities.

Pieces by Margaret Scanlan, Faisal Nazir, and Fatima Syeda comprise Part II of the volume, titled "Pains of Pakistan: Trauma Narratives of Pakistan." Scanlan's essay represents something of a departure from the aims of much of the rest of the essays in *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, as Scanlan centers psychoanalysis as a critical mode in her reading of Uzma Aslam Khan's 2009 novel, *The Geome-*

try of God. Reminiscent of important work on genre in postcolonial as well as critical race and ethnic studies, Scanlan also focuses on the ways in which Khan's novel "re-purposes" modernist and postmodernist techniques to counter distorted Western portrayals of Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s.⁸ Nazir's essay, on Mohammed Hanif's 2018 novel, *Red Birds*, continues Part II's interest in literary aesthetics as a way of representing and redressing postcolonial trauma, arguing that the novel uses multiple narrators and magical realism to narratively (re)create the experience of war trauma. In Part II, of particular note for scholars of gender and masculinity studies is Fatima Syeda's analysis of the character Ali, the male protagonist of Sorayya Khan's 2003 novel, *Noor*, and the ways in which Khan's novel dramatizes the paradoxical emasculation of men as they carry out ostensibly masculine acts of violence in wartime.

Part III, "War and Beyond: Trauma and Bangladeshi Literature," coheres around Bangladeshi literary portrayals of violence against women. Essays by Mohammed Shafiqul Islam and Shamika Shabnam treat novels that reflect on the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, attending in particular to the trauma of the *birangonas*, the women who were raped during the war. In both essays, the histories of these rape survivors, whom the Bangladeshi government raised up to the status of war heroes, emerge as testaments to the extent of the violence and trauma of the conflict. Shab-

⁶ Iyer, "Trauma, Gender, and Caste," 25.

⁷ Zeenat Khan, "Pathogenic Memories and Repetitive Absence: Reading Siddhatha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*, Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*, and Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*, in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 32.

⁸ Margaret Scanlan, "The Postcolonial Novel as a Traumatic Genre: Reading Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geography of God*," in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 59.

nam “call[s] for a change in the way the nation recalls the *birangona*-mother and, thereby, the *birangona*. Listening to the *birangona*-mother when she speaks and understanding how she speaks are strong catalysts for undoing her national marginalization.” For Shabnam, the “*birangona*-mother...offers an alternate historical understanding” of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.⁹ Co-editor Goutam Karmakar’s essay, on Fayeza Hasanat’s 2018 debut short story collection, *The Bird Catcher and Other Stories*, extends the gendered analysis of other essays from Part III and the larger volume by reading the stories’ engagement with the intersection of gendered and racial violence, reproduction and infertility, and xenophobia and diversity.

Part IV, “Trauma-Affected Afghanistan: Wounded Memories and Narratives,” contains essays by Robin E. Field and Gen’ichiro Itakura. Field’s contribution focuses on Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), arguing that *The Kite Runner* and the chapter “Spring 2003” in *And the Mountains Echoed* model the actions and importance of the “responsible bystander” in an Afghan context marked by sexual trauma and the violence of the US-led War in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Of particular note given the overall volume’s investment

in cultivating “cross-cultural altruistic interactions”¹¹ is Field’s notion that Hosseini’s fiction enjoins us as readers to not sit idly by in the face of the trauma of others.

Essays by Badri Prasad Pokharel, Puspa Damai, and Ubaraj Katawal make up Part V of the volume, which focuses on trauma narratives from Nepal. Pokharel’s contribution focuses on the short story anthology *Rebel: Stories of Conflict and War from Nepal*, which contains stories from multiple Nepalese authors compiled and translated by Ram Chandra Khatri. Like so many of the essays in *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, Pokharel’s piece highlights sexual violence against women and the trauma of subjects whose stories are so often forgotten, the “ordinary people living in the hinterlands.”¹² Damai’s essay, among the most theoretically sophisticated and challenging in the volume, draws on theoretical insights from two thinkers who feature in other essays in the volume, Cathy Caruth and Sigmund Freud, and also brings in Derrida and Lacan. Analyzing works by Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Samrat Upadhyay, Damai guides readers through “a discussion of trauma in which temporality gets supplemented by spatiality” in order to articulate traumatic experiences in spaces such as Nepal, a “marginal” place whose trauma is difficult to recognize and characterize from within a Eurocentric tendency to

⁹ Shamika Shabnam, “Speaking in Fragments: The *Birangona*-mother’s Traumatic Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War,” in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 109.

¹⁰ Robin E. Field, “Witnessing Trauma: The Ethical Imperative of Bystanders in Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* and *And the Mountains Echoed*,” in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 137.

¹¹ Karmakar and Khan, “Introduction,” 7.

¹² Badri Prasad Pokharel, “People’s War, Trauma, and Its Consequences in *Rebel: A Cross-Cultural Study in Post-Conflict Nepali Narrative(s)*,” in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 166.

read trauma as “temporal only.”¹³ Ubaraj Katawal’s essay, “Maoist Revolution and Trauma: Fight or Flight in Manjushree Thapa’s *Seasons of Flight*,” brings, among other theoretical strands, the work of Raymond Williams and a British cultural studies Marxist perspective to bear on a dystopian Nepalese narrative. Katawal makes excellent use of the British cultural studies emphasis on oppositional practices and Raymond Williams’ emphasis on contradictions and “overdetermination” as the engine of cultural process.¹⁴ Thapa’s 2010 novel emerges from Katawal’s analysis as a story about the importance of collective and continued efforts to redress social problems in situations where many would either flee or turn to revolution, with its associated upheavals and traumas.

Part VI, on Sri Lankan texts, represents the largest cluster of essays in the volume. Like many of the other clusters of essays, the importance of reading trauma differently in postcolonial contexts emerges as a theoretical and hermeneutic concern that the authors of these essays treat with nuance and insight. Importantly, Marilena Zackheos’ contribution, titled “Queer Recovery: Addressing Violence, Trauma, and Exile in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*,” brings queer theory and queer of color critique into the volume’s larger consideration of South Asian trauma narratives. Zackheos’ formulation of the titular concept of “queer recovery” is particularly val-

uable in light of the volume’s overarching concern with decolonizing trauma studies, an endeavor that requires recognition of the connections between Eurocentrism and heteronormativity. “[Q]ueer or non-normative intimacy[,]” in Zackheos’ argument, generates resistance to both heteronormative and postcolonial oppressions by “represent[ing] the experiences of marginalized, traumatized, and diasporic subjects in life-affirming and empathetic ways” without relying on heteronormative conceptions of life and futurity.¹⁵

The concluding Part of the volume, composed of two essays under the heading “South Asia, Trauma, and Beyond,” returns readers to two of the volume’s major concerns: the narrative techniques—what we might call the aesthetics—of postcolonial trauma, and what Lopamudra Basu describes as the “rehumaniz[ation]” of South Asian subjects whose traumatic experiences are often left ungrieved in the West.¹⁶ Basu’s analysis of Rohingya poetry, specifically the volume *I Am a Rohingya: Poetry from the Camps and Beyond* (2019), as an “active effort in arousing empathy in a transnational audience, who may then join in this project of restitution and justice” for the Rohingya, closes *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature* with an important reminder that the acts of representing and understanding the trauma of others is not just an artistic and

¹³ Puspa Damai, “Traumatism of the Future: Reading Nepali Literature with Caruth, Derrida, and Freud,” in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 169, 171.

¹⁴ Ubaraj Katawal, “Maoist Revolution and Trauma: Fight or Flight in Manjushree Thapa’s *Seasons of Flight*,” in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 181.

¹⁵ Marilena Zackheos, “Queer Recovery: Addressing Violence, Trauma, and Exile in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*,” in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 211, 217.

¹⁶ Lopamudra Basu, “Rohingya Refugee Poetry: Testimony and Cultural Activism,” in Karmakar and Khan, *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, 262.

academic project, but a political one as well.¹⁷

Given the simultaneous range and cohesiveness of literary texts and approaches in the essays in *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature*, the volume would be a useful addition to many libraries' collections. Advanced undergraduates would likely struggle with some of the more theoretically dense essays in the volume, but the broader strokes and stakes of the volume would likely come through for these students. Scholars working in South Asian literary studies and/or trauma studies in particular might do well to add *Narratives of Trauma in South Asian Literature* to their own bookshelves.

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Ryan Wander is an Assistant Professor of English at Valdosta State University. His research interests include late 19th-century through contemporary US literature, Asian American literature, settler colonial studies, and sexuality studies. His scholarship has been published in the journals *Western American Literature* and *Settler Colonial Studies*, and in the 2022 essay collection, *The Routledge Companion to Gender and the American West*. Current projects include a book manuscript titled "Settler Tenses: Frontier Masculinities and Queerness in Literatures of the American West, 1868-1912," which is currently under review, and essays toward a book manuscript on Asian American literature and solidarity between people of Asian descent and Indigenous Peoples in North America.

¹⁷ Basu, "Rohingya Refugee Poetry," 270.