



Vol. 3 No. 1 (January) (2025)

Representation of Post-War Trauma in Soniah Kamal's *An Isolated Incident*

Sumbal Aziz (Corresponding Author)

Department of English, Division of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Education Lahore. Email: sumbalaziz127@gmail.com

Bilal Asmat Cheema

Lecturer, Department of English, Division of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Education Lahore.

Sana Nawaz

Department of English, Division of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Education Lahore

Abstract

The paper highlights the intersection of violence, loss and displacement in Soniah Kamal's *An Isolated Incident*. It also explores the role of fragmented memories in disorienting the nature of trauma where past memories affect the present. The research article aims to explore the psychological effects of war illustrating how survivors struggle to reconcile their painful histories with their present, often reliving traumatic moments voluntarily through flashbacks. This study will apply theory of Psychoanalysis to analyze how characters in an isolated incident are trapped in trauma resulting in repression and denial. Through thorough examination, study reflects the damaged psychological state of survivors. Flashbacks serve as a representation of how unresolved trauma invades daily life. Post war trauma challenges personal and collective identity and not only shatters the individuals' sense of self but also complicates the relationship with their homeland, history and community. The findings aim to contribute the deeper understanding the flashbacks and memories which endure the effects of Post war trauma.

Key words: conflict, memories, psychoanalytic theory, Trauma, war

Introduction

An Isolated Incident by Soniah Kamal is the novel which examines the complexities of love family and identity through the lens of diaspora and cultural expectations. Kamal tells the intertwined stories of Zari Zoon and Bilal Hashmi, two Pakistanis whose lives are completely marked by trauma and the struggle to belong. The Kashmiri girl Zari, has suffered personal loss and violence in her homeland. In Srinagar, Kashmir her family and friends were killed by some warriors. Her parents loved her very much and their happy family turned into a devastated family. In the attack she loses her fiancé whom she loves after her family and their marriage was around the corner but unfortunately everything was finished. Firstly, she moved towards her uncle in Delhi, where she could not



Vol. 3 No. 1 (January) (2025)

console herself and then stepped forward in Pakistan to her Khala's home where memories again shattered in her mind and she was unable to cope with them. Khala informed her that their faraway relatives who lived in America will help her in healing. By following Khala's advice and for a fresh start, in the sake of solace, she travels to United States, where she stays with Nabis family who was migrated from Pakistan. A man from this family, Bilal is haunted by his past and struggles with his Pakistani heritage, regardless of his American lifestyle. As the protagonist Zari grapples with her trauma, Bilal wrestles with his identity torn between the expectations of his Pakistani family and his own American values. Bilal's Dadi named as Mauj jee wrote some letters for Bilal in which she provokes him to do something important that history will record it and his actions will have the capability of changing the history. After this inspiration, Zari after marrying him evokes his emotions to take revenge of the loss of her family and his own grandparents. Now he has inspiration and courage to change the world. He went to Kashmir and faced a lot of challenges, his original identity and many realities opened at him and then he decided to go back to America. This study illustrates the idea of deep scars left by political and personal conflicts. The non-linear structure of the novel serves as a canvas for these fractured memories and the emotional scars that shape Zari and Bilal's lives. Each flashback ascertains the layer of pain, hope and resilience. For Zari, Beauty of Kashmir and her experience of brutality are interwoven, which highlights the complex tapestry of love and loss that effects her every step in America. For Bilal, flashbacks reveal his struggles with cultural duality. Kamal emphasizes the difficulty of reconciling Zari's past with an uncertain future which portrays memory, not as a linear path but a series of unconnected recollections. The study highlights the sociopolitical turmoil of Kashmir and its standing effects on the psyche of its people. It raises awareness about the lasting effects of such experiences on real life individuals, which encourage a compassionate perspective on those grappling with past traumas in unfamiliar setting. Incidents of Zari represent the harsh reality of what it means to be a survivor seeking peace in a world that often overlooks the scars of conflict. It collaborates how longer geopolitical conflicts deeply influence individuals? It also explores that how Kamal's narrative structure and style can convey complex psychological states and enhance a novel's thematic depth.

Literature Review

In Pakistani literature *An Isolated Incident* has much significance in which the protagonist of the story, Zari Zoon has psychological scars on her mind due to political conflicts between India and Pakistan's occupation on Kashmir. She as a resident of Sari Nagar, Kashmir suffered the loss of her family and friends by the attack of some warriors. LaCapra (2001) in "Writing history, writing trauma" says, "Striking in its insistence and durability is the quest or desire for a decisive criterion with which to differentiate humans from other animals as well as the human from the animal in human beings" (p.149). LaCapra (2001) holds that there are two fundamental forms of remembering traumatic events "acting out" and "working through" (p.70). The author takes these concepts from psychoanalysis and attempts to develop their usefulness for historical studies. The use of LaCapra's concept of "Working through" trauma analyzes the gradual acceptance of Zari's past and her attempt to rebuild her life. An Afghan-



Vol. 3 No. 1 (January) (2025)

American author Khalid Hosseini (2020) says that, “Soniah Kamal has written a riveting and deeply engaging novel about the longstanding turmoil in Kashmir ...Kamal explores identity and exile, hope and disillusionment, and the myriad fault lines in the lives of the people living in the shadow of war”. Soniah Kamal’s *An Isolated Incident* deals with the complicated and often ungraspable notions of loss, memory and history. The book starts off in Kashmir with young and promising Zari Zoon creating a sense that it is going to be her story. Soon enough Zari’s life and the novel’s setting are inverted and readers follow her to India, Pakistan and then America. Changes in the book’s geographical setting along with shifts in the narrative’s perspective make it clear that *An Isolated Incident* is not just Zari’s story. New characters are introduced along with their own personal perspectives such as young and desperately earnest Billy. The overwhelming intensity of Billy’s emotions takes over the narrative and his perspective continues through a significant portion of the book. Shuffling back and forth between character perspectives *An Isolated Incident* is then a telling of several entangled stories.

Theoretical Framework

This study will explore the psychological and emotional struggles of the characters through the lens of trauma theory given by different Theorists. By following Sigmund Freud’s Defense mechanism, protagonist Zari represses her memories of family loss to make her survival possible in society. Defense mechanisms are the processes which people employ to reduce stress in the psychological environment. Zari suppresses her painful memories because it is essential to bear in mind as it is part of instinctive process. The psychological mechanism provides a temporary relief which can lead to unresolved issues if the experiences are not acknowledged in a healthy way. “Individuals in crisis have suffered from a psychological trauma. Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless” (Herman, 1992, p.33). Herman found that trauma can be overwhelming and impede a person’s sense of control and natural adaptation to daily life, which then can lead to internalized maladaptive response. In her unconscious, a sound echoes, “How am I supposed to balance a life torn between those who are here and those who are forever gone?” (Kamal, 2014, p.103). Freud gives another concept of denial in “The ego and the mechanisms of defense”, which is a defense mechanism, involves a refusal to accept the reality and blocks external events from awareness. Zari also reacts in refusing way to certain situations. After losing her family, she projects herself in a situation where internalized fear provokes her to distrust others her fear forms various shapes. As Kamal states that “She has started talking to the ghosts, softly at first but now more stridently” (Kamal, 2014, p.60). In the fields of trauma studies, feminists have played a major role by calling attention to issues that specifically affect women like sexual abuse and sexual slavery. In “Aetiology of Hysteria”, 1896 According to Freud, repressed memories of sexual abuse in childhood become the cause of Hysteria and its severity increases with the number of sexual encounters experienced in little age. Zari’s condition precisely described by Kamal, “This girl five times, fifty times, five hundred times not a virgin, what exactly had happened to her, to his wife” (Kamal, 2014, p.182). Freud asserts, that, “A condition has long been known and described which occurs after severe



Vol. 3 No. 1 (January) (2025)

mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life; it has been given the name of ‘traumatic neurosis’. The terrible war which has just ended gave rise to a number of illness of this kind, but it at least put an end to the temptation to attribute the cause of the disorder to organic lesions of the nervous system brought about by mechanical system” (Freud, 1920, p.6). Zari’s dreams occurring in traumatic neurosis have characteristics of repeatedly bringing back into the situation of her accident which leads to a situation from which she wakes up in another fright. Fright is however a name for a person like Zari and Bilal who are being engulfed by danger without being prepared for it. Those painful memories was lingering in Zari’s mind. “Her second favorite place was her bed with its plump mattress and thick patchwork quilt and the tape player in easy reach on the beside table and the tarnished full-length mirror opposite the bed reflecting the wall space she’d decorated with a medley of Baz’s drawings, ribbons she’d won for sports and academic achievements, and photographs of her family and friends” (Kamal, 2014, p.53). In “Trauma and recovery”, “Traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community. Those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity, depends upon a feeling of connection with others. The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience. Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatizes; the group bears witness and affirms. Trauma degrades the victim; the group exalts her. Trauma dehumanizes the victim; the group restores her humanity” (Herman, 1992). Zari was helpless and hopeless with heartaches but there is no option despite survival. Herman elaborates that Individuals display hyper arousal, trauma recovery are the restoration of safety and empowerment. Recovery does not necessarily mean complete freedom from post traumatic affects but generally it is the ability to live in the present without being overwhelmed by the thoughts and feelings of the past. Being outside of your Window of Tolerance is when you get triggered and feel overwhelmed with panic, anxiety, anger or depression. “She was to concentrate on fixing herself alone” (Kamal, 2014, p.45). Throughout “Trauma and Recovery”, Trauma is often caused by natural disaster, war combat, rape, childhood sexual, physical or emotional abuse by a parent, spouse, or anyone else. It can also be caused by witnessing someone’s else’s abuse, an accident, or sudden death of a loved one. Chronic trauma can occur when several traumatic incidents happen over a period of time. Another character Bilal Nabi from the novel follows this concept of denial as he pretends that everything is fine to make his family expectations fulfilled but his inner faith with a voice insists him to become a witness and ultimately winner. As Kamal’s lines explain the state of Bilal, “I want to fight for Kashmir’s independence, from India and Pakistan” (Kamal, 2014, p.193). Bilal also becomes the witness of zari’s pain and hide his own trauma and unresolved issues related to his cultural Identity and family pressure.

Trauma is “not the story of something that happened back then, but the current imprint of that pain horror and fear living inside the individual” (Kolk, 2014). Trauma extends beyond being a narrative about past events that justify why someone might feel scared, angry, or unbalanced. Instead, it manifests in the present as deeply unsettling physical sensations and emotions, often



Vol. 3 No. 1 (January) (2025)

disconnected from any conscious recollection of the original traumatic experience. “Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves” (Kolk, 2014, p.97). The text depicts state of Zari’s present, “Only eighteen years old...better the poor girl had died...or kill herself ...her life will be a nightmare...no one will marry her and without marriage, husband, children, simply a future _ what life?” (Kamal, 2014, p.36).

Victor Frankl (1949) illustrates in his book “Men’s search for meaning”, the idea that people can find meaning in their sufferings and that surviving trauma involves giving meaning to it. This theory is referred to, “Logo therapy focuses rather on the future, that is to say, on the meanings to be fulfilled by the patient in his future” (Frankl, 1946, p.104). In the novel Zari and Bilal redefine their identities and explore resilience. Both rebuild their lives even haunted by memories of loss and pain. Zari said in the novel, “I love you, Bilal, I’ll be your home” (Kamal, 2014, p.374). Their sufferings transformed into a source of strength and both reconciled their ability to accept the reality. “An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is a normal behavior” (Frankl, 1946, p.32). Kamal in the novel portrayed the situation of reconciliation, “Zari had sold the house in Kashmir and they were using the money to setup the Foundation after having sent a little something to the cleaning woman and the family of the kitchen boy who’d perished along with Zari family” (Kamal, 2014, p.377).

Discussion and Analysis

After being alone in the whole universe, Zari dislocated from home town and migrated to United States. Scattered memories inflicted on her mind became the cause of giving harm to herself because she thinks that the only thing which makes her happy is to hurt herself. After displacement, her sufferings were not become less but she was indulging herself into more. Another character Bilal Nabi from that home where she migrated, helps her to reconcile with her inner conflict as he was also a victim of lost Identity. Kamal balanced the gender role in this novel because two different genders are facing the trauma in different ways. Kamal in actual, perpetuates not only the terrible story of Zari but there is a parallel between her journey and the Kashmiri community’s ongoing struggle for identity and justice. In contrast, the role of hostel family especially Billy, in creating a space for recovery and reconnection which serve as therapeutic mechanism. The results indicate that trauma is correlated between present and past life, by the support of Theorists who give their views in different perspectives. The violent loss of her family in Kashmir and fragmentation of bitter memories make difficulty in articulating her pain. Kamal uses silence and ellipses to represent the unspeakable Zari’s fractured psyche portrayed as reflection of flashbacks and fragmented memories. Sigmund Freud and other theorist’s works have been related with the situation of the characters which is uncontrollable as whispering thoughts are harmful and they are engulfing them hardly. According to an American Psychiatrist, Judith Herman, Trauma theory explains how certain events can be so intense and overwhelming that they exceed



Vol. 3 No. 1 (January) (2025)

an individual's ability to cope effectively, resulting in feelings of helplessness and terror. This theory not only describes the symptoms associated with trauma-related disorders but also emphasizes the importance of properly identifying and addressing specific types of trauma, such as those caused by sexual abuse, domestic violence, and other forms of violence. It argues that by classifying these experiences under the term "complex post-traumatic stress disorders" and providing tailored treatment for this condition, victims can have a better chance of achieving meaningful recovery and healing (Herman, 1992). Zari touched her throat and says, "Sometimes, it hurts so much I can't breathe" (Kamal, 2014, p.111). Cathy Caruth (1996) argues that "trauma openly resist straight forward representation and often manifests in fragmented ways. Trauma can be seen as an intense wound that defies integration into narrative memory. The unassimilated event that disrupts identity and resists incorporation into conventional memory" (p.5). By shadowing Zari's condition, from the novel, "A normal person would have died from the shock and the horrors. Why was she still alive?" (Kamal, 2014, p.36). Kamal also narrates the behavior of the Zari who is struggling to find her peace by hurting herself. "He opened the mirror cabinet next, looking for more razors, for anything else with which she could cut herself__ a nail cutter, deodorant, dental floss and he caught his breath" (Kamal, 2014, p.177). The novel also narrates the larger Kashmiri conflict which blends the individual stories with collective suffering. She is still torn between reality and memories lingering in her mind and relates her tragedy with her area of conflict (Kashmir). Kamal tells us the status of Zari in following lines, "You people are confused about who you are. Kashmir is just another history in the book of histories for you but, for me, it's my Reality" (Kamal, 2014, p.158). Universal effects of trauma on consciousness create a link between personal and shared traumatic experiences. It disrupts the capacity of mind to articulate and make it difficult to assign meaning and linguistic representation to such overwhelming incidents. "It is indeed the truth of the traumatic experience that forms the center of its psychopathology; it is not a pathology of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself" (Caruth, 1996, p.5). In the novel *An Isolated Incident* happy family turned into all dead despite of Zari who has to survive for no reason and a purposeless life is waiting in which endurance is key element to remain alive. She has scattered memories like the memory of her nephew Baz, his last scream she'll never forget. Example from the text, "She would never be able to forget his scream. His scream the final lucid memory she would be able to conjure up between the moment of Reality and the moment of speculation" (Kamal, 2014, p.34). As a symbol of confidence and independent man Bilal fights for Zari and acknowledges her situation. His affection becomes the cause of zari's survival by which Kamal gives the concept of dual narratives and make a balance between genders. Bilal in the novel says, "But people like you and me, Zaar, we're grand halls with windows upon windows open to any and every memory" (Kamal,2014, p.159). By examining the state of the characters, trauma theory is suitable but if we see through the lens of diaspora this study will further contribute to marginalization and displacement. Although our main focus is to combine a precise work on how trauma intrudes in individuals' daily lives and what are the consequences which are described above, but there is also a space for other theories in the novel like feminist approach of Zari. Harmony is



Vol. 3 No. 1 (January) (2025)

restored because both major characters accept the reality of hard life and continued their lives by God's will. Victor Frankl's quotes the situation of reconciliation, "The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up cross, gives him ample opportunity even under the most difficult circumstances to add a deeper meaning to his life" (Frankl, 1946, p.76).

Conclusion

By concluding, *An Isolated Incident* deals with complex themes related to identity, family and cultural expectations, particularly in the context of Pakistani-American life. The scope of this study might also be restricted by focusing on certain themes—such as identity or trauma—while overlooking others, thus missing the interconnectedness of the novel's complex messages. Furthermore, any attempt to discern authorial intent may be problematic, as Kamal's writing often leaves room for varied interpretations, which may affect the depth of analysis. The historical and socio-political context in which the novel was written and set should also be considered to avoid limiting the research to a narrow lens. *An Isolated Incident* by Kamal explores the enduring impact of loss and the resilience required for self-discovery and healing. The novel contributes to trauma literature and it resonates in a global context of conflict and displacement. Through a well-developed characters and engaging storyline, Kamal skillfully portrays the challenges of navigating traditional values alongside modern influences while exploring larger question of self discovery. This project has explored the multifaceted nature of the novel, and acknowledges the limitations of interpretation, cultural context and theoretical approaches, with a deep examination of key themes such as identity, political conflicts, memory and family dynamics. This plaintive work has ability to encourages the readers to reflect the universal themes of Resilience, Identity and quest for meaning in an ever-changing world.

References

- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Frankl, V. E. (2006). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1946)
- Freud, S. (1894). The neuro-psychoses of defence. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 3, pp. 43–61). London: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1894)
- Freud, S. (1896). The aetiology of hysteria. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 3, pp. 187–221). London: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1896)
- Freud, S. (1920). Beyond the pleasure principle. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 18, pp. 1–64). London: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1920)
- Freud, S. (1923). The ego and the id. *Standard Edition of the Complete*



Vol. 3 No. 1 (January) (2025)

- Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 19. London: Hogarth Press.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Kamal, S. (2014). *An Isolated Incident*. Fingerprint Publishing
- Kolk, V. d. B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, NY: Viking.
- LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press.