Does Trauma Matter? A Peep Into Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*

Saba Anish

"Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences"
Freud ('On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena' 1893)

Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breur's famous essay 'On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena' published in 1893, paved the turn from physical to psychical dimensions vis-a-vis trauma, thereby posing a challenge to the received wisdom that hysteria was the result of physical degeneration. The writers together posited that the physical symptoms of the hysteric - the trance states, violent mood swings, amnesias, partial paralysis of the body etc. - could actually be traced to the traumatic effects in the past. Although trauma had already become a discourse by the 17th century, yet the emphasis was always on the external establishing a close proximity with physical wound and bodily injury. However, it was the seminal work by Freud and Breur that bought to the foreground the new psychical meanings. 'In traumatic neurosis' they wrote:

> The operative cause of the illness is not the trifling physical injury but the affect of fright - the psychical trauma. In an analogous manner, our investigations reveal, for many, if not for most, hysterical symptoms, precipitating causes which can only be described as psychical traumas. Any experience which call up distressing affects - such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain - may operate as a trauma of this kind." (qtd in. Waugh 498)

Freud and Breurer in their work suggested that it is not so much as the traumatic event itself as the memory of the trauma that 'acts like an agent provocateur in releasing the symptom'. (qtd in. Waugh, 499) The crux of their statement points a psychical trauma as

something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. As it is nowhere to be placed, it falls out of conscious memory, yet is still present in the mind in the form of an intruder or a ghost. Physical symptoms, they suggest, are enigmatic signposts pointing to traumatic memories hidden away in the psyche.

In his 1896 lecture 'The Aetiology of Hysteria', Freud proposed a controversial origin that 'Whatever case and whatever symptom we take as our point of departure, in the end we infallibly come to the field of sexual experience.' (published in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* 199) Freud had made a stunning revelation that nearly all of his patients had reported instances of premature sexual encounters that, as they occurred before sexual maturity, had remained unassimilable to normal mental functioning. It is, however, disturbance to infantile sexuality, that provides an affective force to produce traumatic neurosis and hysterical symptoms. Freud even suggested that in later life traumatic responses to other events including those unrelated to sexual sphere, can actually be traced to a psychically wounded predisposition that had resulted from sexual events in childhood. The analyst had to work steadily backwards through layers of memory until the primary sexual encounter could be uncovered.

Freud, who is conventionally caricatured as reducing everything to sexuality, returned to the subject of traumatic neurosis long after the 1890's, coming up with a very different account. The renewed consideration was provoked by World War I, which had forced military and medical authorities to confront a new form of psychical wounding: shell-shock. There were increasing instances of soldiers who broke down without any bodily injury and were treated by the Army as malingerers or deserters, indicating how ideas of trauma still privileged the physical over the psychical in the 1914-1918 War. Still there were many doctors who began to recognise the profound psychological damage inflicted by trench conditions. The soldier victims not only suffered memory gaps, but also repeatedly re-experienced extreme events in flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations months or even years afterwards. Freud's war neurosis can be taken as a starting point for sketching in a whole philosophical conception in which the destabilizing energies released by traumatic impact become the very driving force of psychic life.

Closely associated with Freud's models of trauma is the structure of memory; the traumatic event carry a sense of belatedness about responses, a 'deferred action', or what the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche has called the après coup or 'afterwardness' of trauma. In 1899 Freud wondered 'whether we have any memories at all from our childhood: memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess'. (qtd. in Waugh 501) Indeed memories from childhood could carry a certain objectivity, buried away and awaiting discovery by the

analyst. However, memories relating to childhood would mean that all memories could be subject to retrospective transformation, and could only ever provide an interpretative account of childhood, bringing with it trails of questions like: Was the record of the traumatic event lodged in the unconscious, waiting for recall, or was it the very product of that recall? Can we separate memory from what we desire to remember? Trauma, thus seems to be a crux, harbouring on the undecidability of representation and the limits of knowledge.

Set in Mir Ali, a blighted fictional city in north-west Pakistan (Waziristan), *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* is Fatima Bhutto's debut attempt at fiction. Opening on a Friday morning as the city readies itself for the special namaaz ahead of Eid, the story hurries through the lives of three brothers one rainswept morning culminating in devastating circumstances. The daylong unfolding encapsulates very strongly the tribal region's long drawn out fight against what they see as the betrayal of the State, the suffering that the people undergo for this long drawn out battle, political turmoil, large scale devastation wrought by war and fundamentalism etc. In the course of three intense hours - the three brothers - Aman, Hayat and Sikandar and the very strong and fiery Samarra, reflect on the past choices and imminent decisions. Aman aims to free himself from the noose of turning state informer; Hayat hopes to emerge from Inayat's oppressive legacy; Sikandar struggles to end his wife Mina's suffering and repair their marriage; and Samarra determines to avenge her father's disappearance. *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* vividly captures not just the trauma of war, but also the conflicts of contemporary Pakistanis, torn between remaining faithful to the legacy of previous generations and their own dreams of choosing their own destiny. This dilemma of the contemporary times is wrought out by Bhutto through the mechanism of memory, traumatic experiences and an attempt to come to terms with those experiences.

The present paper is a humble attempt to study Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* in the light of trauma theory, specially the foundations of trauma as laid by Sigmund Freud. However, the focus of the study in trauma will be the two female protagonists Samarra and Mina and how they react after going through physical and psychological traumatic neurosis in their lives. This apart, the paper will try to analyse if trauma in South Asia in any degree different from the West. The reader's attention is drawn towards an anxiety resulting from disturbances in the tribal region in the prologue itself as we learn that for reasons of security the three brothers in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* cannot offer their Friday Eid prayers together. The author states: "Fridays are always chaotic in the house on Sher Hakimullah road and this morning difficult decisions have been made. The brothers cannot-will not-it is finally decided after some days of deliberation, pray together on Eid." (Bhutto 2) Again in the very first chapter Bhutto hints at the ethnic rebellion against the state control of Pakistan and the long drawn struggle of the tribal states to set themselves free of the State apparatus. This

decades long struggle against Pakistan has left Mir Ali crippled and pushed its tired inhabitants to the very brink of abnormality. Among the present generation some attempt to flee the upsetting environment while the rest continue with the struggle and dream of their forefathers and paying the price for it. The trauma in Mir Ali is also the off shoot of a three dimensional endless war- American drones versus the Taliban; Sunni Muslims bombing Shia Muslims; and an underground, generations-old fight for independence from the Central Government.

Tariq Rahman in his book *Language and Politics in Pakistan* has very strongly established how the separatist movement in Pakistan is actually bound up with language and ethnicity problems in the nation. Rahman in the introduction of his book posits that Pakistan is not just a multilingual but also a multinational state. The five indigenous nationalities defined in the 1960's were Punjabi, Pakhtun, Sindhi, Balochi and Bengali. However, after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the Siraki identity emerged, so the number remained unchanged. By the late 1980's, the Mohajirs, who had earlier called themselves Pakistanis, began to assert their distinctive ethnic identity too. The state, according to Rahman, denies the existence of these nationalities. It asserts the uni-national thesis-that all Pakistanis belong to one nation, notwithstanding their differences. This denial of multinational identity is one of the root causes of disturbance in the tribal regions like Mir Ali. Language is thus at the heart of Pakistan's most significant political problem - ethnicity. Viewed from the point of language, power politics and identity, Pakistan is presently divided into two camps: Pakistani nationalists and ethno-nationalists. To quote Rahman:

> Both the Pakistani nationalists and the ethno-nationalists evoke simplistic and unsupportable conspiracy theories. The former assert that the ethno-nationalists, who support the multinationality thesis of which the language movements are an expression, are the enemies of Pakistan; that they want to break up the country, despite protestations to the contrary, and that they are inspired, and even supported, by foreign powers (India, Afghanistan, the former Soviet Union, etc.) They are accused of using Communists, Hindus, left-wing intellectuals, and selfish politicians to instigate and support language movements. The nationalists assert that it is gullible people, generally students, who join these movements without realizing what they are doing. In short, the supporters of the language movements are marked as either traitors or fools; either enemies of Pakistan and Islam or gullible pawns of such enemies.
>
> In opposition, the ethno-nationalists argue that the Punjabi ruling elite, in collaboration with the Mohajir elite and co-opted members from other ethnic groups, have deliberately conspired to practice internal

> colonialism. They rule the periphery-the provinces with non-Punjabi majorities-in the name of Islam and Pakistani nationalism. As Urdu is part of the latter, it is imposed on the whole country. The consequence of this policy, they argue, is the exploitation of their resources to increase the wealth of the Punjab; the perpetual subordination of their people to the dominance of the Punjab and the disappearance of the indigenous cultures and languages. In short, the non-Punjabi provinces have exchanged British colonialism for Punjabi-and in the cultural space Mohajir-colonialism. Thus, in their eyes, their language movements are part of an ongoing anti-colonial struggle which can only be opposed by selfish colonialists or simpletons who are taken in by the slogans of Islam and Pakistani nationalism. Thus for the ethno-nationalists, their opponents, the supporters of Urdu, are either exploiters or fools. (Rahman 4-5)

Bhutto's novel is dense with images of Pakistan's denial of multinational identity and the crushing of rebellion in the neighbouring states with a high hand. The demonstration of military might to contain the rebellion and to negate its ethnic voice is one of the prime sources of trauma in Mir Ali. In the very first chapter Inayat delves down the memory lane to tell his son Aman Erum of how thousands of them, in convoys of armoured vehicle, weighed down with garlands of assault weapons and hand grenades, flooded into Mir Ali. They came in conquering battalions and in plain clothes. Doors were broken down in the dead of night, men were kidnapped from their streets, women were widowed and children were orphaned to teach the town its most important lesson: there was no match for the ruthlessness of the state. Another generation of male warriors will not grow in Mir Ali.

Bhutto narrates how the Pakistanis looked upon Mir Ali as a traitor: "Most Pakistanis thought of Mir Ali with the same hostility they reserved for India or Bangladesh; insiders - traitors - who fought their way out of the body and somehow made it on their own without the glory of the crescent moon and star shining overhead." (Bhutto 19) In the same chapter the Pakistani army is held responsible for the outbreak of civil war in the neighbouring states. Inayat tells how town by town, civil wars were lit by the wide-scale violence of the army - a violence that spanned decades and finally reached its zenith in the war on terror. Swat, Bajaur, Deer, Bannu... one by one they all rose up against the state. Mir Ali has come to accept trauma as a part of its identity resulting from the centre periphery hatred. As Inayat prepares Hayat for the future fight the former insists: "We will teach our children to live with curfews and midnight raids, prepare the elderly for moves at three in the morning, abandoning our homes and possessions. Each and every member of the household will know that pain is of no consequence when fighting for the collective." (Bhutto 23)

The humiliation that the natives of the tribal states have to face as traitors in Pakistan is seen through Aman Erum's encounter with the mainstream. Aman's insatiable thirst to escape to America leaving behind his own bleeding land, lands him in Islamabad to do the formalities at the American Embassy located in the capital city. From the very moment he enters the city everyone from the bus driver to the clerks at the American Embassy insults him and equates him with a terrorist. The driver of the bus in which Aman Erum is seated scoffs: "Hundreds of jawans - thousands - how many of our men have spilled their blood fighting you terrorists?" (Bhutto 28) At the Embassy office Aman was asked to air his views on 9/ 11. Aman Erum simply lowered his eyes. At this juncture the narrator intervenes to bring out the vulnerability of Mir Ali as America's soft target in its war against terror and Pakistan's treacherous role in pushing Afghanistan into the fray. Aman recalls how

> Two aeroplanes hit foreign buildings, this was what people in Mir Ali heard. What they knew about the new war, what they understood about the events that turned their own into a battlefield once more, was this: those planes were flown by heroes.
>
> But this is also what they heard: the wounded empire was waging a war against Islam. They heard that the war was a form of what the empire called infinite justice - it was infinite justice when they were the ones piloting the planes, but not when they were the victims of such just violence.
>
> They heard that the men who flew the planes were from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, but that the empire was going to strike Afghanistan first. When it became known one October morning, via radio and the local television channels, that Afghanistan had been hit and was in the throes of a foreign occupation - even though, it was noted, none of the men on those furious aeroplanes were Afghans - the men of Mir Ali understood that the state, Pakistan, had aided the attack on their brothers.
>
> Pakistan had opened its air space to the empire, closed Quetta airport so that foreign soldiers could use it as a makeshift base, allowed them access to their intelligence files, and put their invasive agencies at America's beck and call.
>
> Aman Erum looked up and nodded gravely at the visa officer's round face. 'It was a terrible thing,' he said. 'A terrible thing.'" (Bhutto 38-39)

In this atmosphere of all pervading gloom, where almost all the denizens of Mir Ali stand face to face with trauma, Bhutto brushes up her two female protagonists Samarra and Mina with a heroic tinge, who in their own unique ways try to cope up with trauma. In an attempt to avenge her father Ghazan Afridi's disappearance, Samarra herself becomes a

victim of the State's military might. As one fighting for Mir Ali's liberty, Samarra had to pay the price in the form of sexual assault. Samarra was forcefully lifted in a car, her hands "had been bound and a filthy rag, smelling of sweat and of diesel, had been placed over her like a shroud." (Bhutto 162) Samarra neither screamed nor uttered a word. After a short drive Samarra was pushed out of the car, and pulled by her clothes to a standing position in a warm room where she found herself in front of a man with "bags under his eyes, darkly lined as if the sun had shaded in his skin...Smattering of sunspots gave the impression of middle age. Benign, a soon-to-be-retired military man. She could not tell his rank, but he wore medals upon his breast." (Bhutto 164) His verbal altercation with Samarra ends up in physical assault. She was hit and blown out of her chair so hard that she never heard with her right ear again. As Samarra lay on the floor,

> twisted onto her side with her hands still bound behind her back, the man stood up. He unbuckled or unbuttoned something. She heard a click and waited, holding her breath. The sound was followed by a small thud, something being placed on one of the folding chairs, and then the sound of him walking towards her. He stood on her hair in his standard-issue ox-blood boots. From where she lay, Samarra could see how his leather boots shone against the grime of the floor. (Bhutto 164-165)

After repeated physical assault, Samarra was almost broken yet she mustered up courage enough to shout back at the tormentor: "I know that you are the ones who have sold everything in this country you defend so urgently. You sold its gold, its oil, its coal, its harbours. I know you are the first in these sixty-six years of your great country's history to have sold its skies. What have you left untouched?" (Bhutto 166) This traumatic incident leaves Samarra totally shattered, but not broken. She's back in a new avatar leading a group of young rebels in their quest for liberty. In this role she has buried her past traumatic experience, though not forgotten them. Unlike ordinary women who would just keep on revisiting the past, Samarra fought back. She fought back to prove her innocence along with her father Ghazan Afridi's. Samarra remembered his promise of the coming years. She fought to believe it was still possible. She finally fought to erase from her life the man with the medals on his chest and the rose-gold wedding ring on his finger. And her revenge motive reaches its climax as she masterminds a fatal attack on the Chief Minister of the frontier state who was "coming all the way from his whitewashed bungalow in the capital to preside over the induction of four hundred of Mir Ali's finest into the national army." (Bhutto 146-147) Samarra had buried the bruises so deep that only once in her life she spoke about the incident to Hayat. The narrator dwells how Samarra stood with her back against the door and told Hayat about the man with the ox-blood boots. Without raising her voice, she told Hayat about the seven hour

torture before the men let themselves out of the room. She spoke in short sentences. She did not cry. But she did not move her back from the door either. She didn't leave herself unguarded. Hayat listened quietly, but he knew she was holding back. "He could feel her retreat, saw her shiver as she mouthed certain words. Hayat was almost certain he saw her shiver. Ox-blood boots." (Bhutto 180) Though Samarra treats the incident as a closed chapter, yet she cannot stop revisiting. There are times when she told herself that her imaginings of what more they were capable of doing to her were far worse than what had actually happened. She had endured only seven hours of them "...what was that to a lifetime of fear? If they caught her now, what was the worst they could do? Fourteen hours? Twenty-one? (Seventy thousand and eighty hours. She was no longer afraid of her calculations)" (Bhutto 182-183)

Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* presents another strong female protagonist Mina, who having lost her only child in a Talibani attack on the Hasan Faraz Government Hospital has gone into a state of trauma. She stopped teaching at the University, stored and hoarded newspapers for weeks and months looking for obituary boxes and funerals and entering people's homes attending the funerals of strangers. Mina, in an attempt to cope up with her traumatic experience started invading other people's grief and sat with crying strangers. She started visiting the families of young victims of violence on the very day of the funeral and turning the whole process uncomfortable with her volley of questions regarding the unnatural death. It is through Mina's intruding into such households, we are told how young people and children are increasingly becoming targets of both State violence and brutal Taliban attacks. In the next house that Mina lands to show her solidarity, a man narrates about the tragic death of his nephew:

> He was a child. They bombed the road his school van was on, his class van on their way to the governor's house to perform an Eid presentation...The bastards thought it was a government car. It was a van filled with children. They saw heat with their sensors. It was packed heat: there were children inside. They fired an RPG into it. They didn't look at the day's visitors' sheet. They would have known, but they didn't know, they just fired. (Bhutto 76)

Mina's out of the normal behaviour to come to terms with her own traumatic neurosis reaches its climax when she sings to the dead boy, reciting Rahman Baba's poetry to him in a soft voice as she washes his knees gently with the sponge, preparing him as if he were going to say his prayers.'I thought I could wake up this sleeping country with my cries, but still they sleep as if in a dream.' (Bhutto 77)

Inspite of her husband Sikander's repeated attempts to remove her from the place, she bathes the dead boy tenderly, stopping her recitations of poetry only to murmur the fateha prayer over his head. To look for her grief in the lines of other mothers' faces, to

search for her son amongst other boys taken too soon, to know that there was a community of widows and the bereft who knew how she suffered: this was a comfort to Mina. She had not managed to translate this, to explain how it felt, but other people's understanding of her rituals was secondary. She did not lose sleep over their misinterpretations. But it is the same Mina, who is considered mad by the society at large, puts up a brave heart in a direct encounter with the Taliban militants. As she has to accompany her husband Sikander across the forest who has to attend on a complicated delivery, a possible stillbirth, they are attacked by a gang of fierce Talib militants. While Sikander takes the shelter of falsity by introducing himself as the ambulance driver and Mina as a doctor, Mina, on the other hand, screams at the militants as 'Zalim!', the unjust. This moved the Talib for there is no greater slur Mina could have levelled. These men the narrator states are

> the students of justice. They can be accused of being violent, of being rash, of anything but injustice. They have built their war around the battle of the just against the unjust. People misunderstand them; they assume it's a war against unbelievers, against disbelief. That has nothing to do with it. Their war was always about justice. They bear its mantle and they drape themselves in its banner. (Bhutto 191)

Mina continues her verbal attack on the Talibani men for attacking Hasan Faraz Government Hospital and for their ignorance regarding Mir Ali's role in its fight against Pakistan. She yells: "We have been fighting those men since before you grew beards, before you learned how to read the Koran backwards. You didn't think about the victims of those killers who were treated in the hospital, did you?" (Bhutto 213) In her altercation Mina reminiscences how her son Zalan was killed in the Hospital attack and how "Zalan didn't have a side in the war." (Bhutto, 214)

Though Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* upholds a Mir Ali that is steeped in trauma in its three dimensional fight between Pakistan and the tribal States, between Taliban and America in the soils of Afghanistan and a third fight between the Shia and Sunni Muslims, it is the two female protagonists, Samarra and Mina, who provide interesting insights as victims of trauma - the former a physical and the latter a psychological victim. However, both the women put up a strong fight against the environs of all pervasive gloom and find their own cure to cope up with trauma. Through the portraiture of both the female characters, Bhutto has uphold a strong picture of women victims in the face of traumatic situations. The book also holds interesting insights into how the west treats Asia and specially the Soth Asian Islamic nations as perpetrators of violence. Thus, Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* remains an interesting arena in the study of trauma and specially female memory vis-a-vis trauma.

Works Cited

Bhutto, Fatima. *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*. Gurgaon: Penguin Books India, 2014. Print.

Luckhurst, Roger. "Mixing memory and desire: psychoanalysis, psychology, and trauma theory". *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.

Rahman, Tariq. Language and Politics in Pakistan. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1997. Print.

C:\Users\User\Downloads\g u seminar\'The Shadow of the Crescent Moon,' by Fatima Bhutto - The New York Times.htm. Web. 20 Dec 2014.

C:\Users\User\Downloads\g u seminar\The Shadow of the Crescent Moon by Fatima Bhutto, review - Telegraph.html. Web. 10 Nov 2014.