

Psycho-emotional Trauma in the Conflict Zone: A Cross-cultural Epistemological Reading of Soniah Kamal's *An Isolated Incident*

Rafi Ullah*, Syed Hanif Rasool†

Abstract

Trauma in conflict zones, especially amongst women, has been an important, often under-studied issue both in literary analysis and cross-cultural psychology. However, literature has been one of the few fields where such sufferings have been acknowledged and explored in South Asia where state violence, enforced disappearances and gender-based violence has caused deep psychological distress. This paper studied the depiction of this protagonist's psycho-emotional trauma in the novel *An Isolated Incident* set in the conflict area of Indian Kashmir. The study used an interdisciplinary methodology to examine Zari's trauma using the Ayurvedic approach, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Buddhist philosophy, Jeffrey Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory, and Foucault's theories of power, which concluded that this trauma could not be fully explained using solely Western clinical frameworks. The Eastern perspective, which sees trauma as a disturbance of vital energies, and/or as ongoing suffering, provided a more culturally and experientially grounded understanding of Zari's experience. The analysis foregrounded the psychological traumas of the protagonist and embedded them in the wider context of military occupation, gendered violence, and patriarchal shame and collective silence, which all helped to sustain individual trauma. The study utilized a textual analysis method to demonstrate that *An Isolated Incident* had played an important role in representing trauma experience among women in the South Asian conflict literature and could be understood in a cross-cultural and decolonizing manner.

Keywords: psycho-emotional trauma, hypervigilance, dissociation, survivor's guilt, social withdrawal, vital energy disruption, biopolitical surveillance, collective silencing

*PhD Scholar, Department of English, Khushal Khan Khattak University, Karak, Email: rafiktk75@gmail.com ,

†Associate Professor & Chairman, DEFL, University of Swat Email: syedhanifrasool@uswat.edu.pk

Introduction

Kashmir is one of the most militarized areas in the world, with decades of violent abuses and abuses of the law, including extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and systematic gender-based violence (GBV). This long-standing injustice has been so deeply ingrained that it has led to long-term psychological trauma from one generation to the next. In Kashmir, the use of rape as a political weapon has been institutionalized and is not an individual act, but a method of communal humiliation, punishment and political control, as outlined in Human Rights Watch's Report, "Rape in Kashmir: A Crime of War" (Human Rights Watch, 1993: 3, 14). These are corroborated in the 1995 Annual Report of Amnesty International which states that armed men rape, mutilate and kill women in conflict situations without their experiences being taken into account and hidden by the magnitude of the violence (Amnesty International, 1995: 1, 18). The 2015 "Kashmir Mental Health Survey" by MSF has revealed that almost 1.8 million adults in the Kashmir Valley, about half of the Valley's total adult population, show severe mental distress. Of these, 41% appear to be in a state of probable depression, 26% are probably suffering from anxiety and 19% are probably experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (MSF, 2015: 9). These statistics not only capture individual pain, but also the psychological impact of a structural condition defined by Peer Ahmad and Balamurugan as a 'chronic and unavoidable trauma' stemming from daily curfews, forced disappearances and pervasive surveillance (Ahmad & Balamurugan, 2020: 7042). In the post-5 August 2019 period, Zainab Zafar's research suggests that Kashmiri women have been further exposed to the risk of exploitation and violence, whereby they are under stronger surveillance and their voice to express their pain is being muffled. Amjad's sociological work shows that political turmoil has an impact on the lives of Kashmiri women, often leaving them as widows, single mothers, or socially isolated, where traumatic experiences continue unnoticed and accumulate (Amjad, 2018: 12).

This research comes at the intersection of Eastern healing epistemologies, and trauma studies, and follows in the footsteps of scholars who have noted that the psycho-emotional aspect of gendered trauma in the aftermath of conflict in South Asia have been largely under-theorized from a non-western perspective. The setting and the social logic of the protagonist's trauma is embedded in the geographical and political situation of Kashmir as one of the world's longest conflicts. This study aims to suggest a decolonized reading strategy that takes into account the cultural specificity of suffering and survival in this context by combining the elements of Ayurvedic medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine and

Buddhist philosophy with Foucauldian political theory and Cultural Trauma Theory. The juxtaposition of military occupation, patriarchy, religious nationalism, and imposed silence creates a intricate psycho-social atmosphere. The dual burden of women in conflict areas refers to the double exposure to political violence and GBV in their homes and communities. Throughout the history of literature in the South Asian tradition, the individual plight of women has been overlooked, marginalized, and overshadowed by the geopolitics, masculine soldiers, and the national narrative. The psychological and cultural nuances of female survivor internal experiences: fear, hypervigilance, isolation, self-blame, detachment, are rarely captured. This cultural silence mirrors and reinforces the overall cultural denials of women's trauma in conflict zones (Whitehead, 2004: 18; Tilwani, 2022: 348). *An Isolated Incident* (2014) meets this literary silence head on in the work of Soniah Kamal. The novel is about Zari, a young Kashmiri woman whose family members were killed and who has survived sexual violence at the hands of seemingly unknown armed men. Kamal does not show Zari as a symbol, as a victim, but as a real person. Fears, withdrawal, guilt and dissociation are shown psychologically and culturally nuanced. Aziz et al (2023: 37–40) states scholars have observed how the combination of trauma effects on the character of Zari has been captured in her development as a character, and that the novel's fragmented structure visually represents the disruption of consciousness as a result of traumatic experience. The novel is a work of art and a political statement; Zari's tragedy is not unique, as official narratives suggest, but part of a systemic problem which is often ignored. There needs to be a framework to understand Zari's trauma, one that is more comprehensive than the western psychiatric models. Although the work of western scholars like Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman and Bessel van der Kolk has informed them, their theories of trauma are Euro-American and focus on ideas of self, healing and the interrelatedness of language, memory and recovery. Some of these models may not capture the experience and expression of trauma in non-Western settings. The paper therefore brings in the Eastern healing practices (Ayurvedic medicine, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Buddhist philosophy) and Foucault's theory of biopower and surveillance and also Jeffrey Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory. These viewpoints together enable a more extensive conceptualization of Zari's emotional suffering, and a broader, decolonized understanding of trauma in literature. In Ayurveda, trauma affects the Vata dosha, leading to anxiety, fear, and nervous system disorders, and also affects Ojas which is also known as resilience and stability (Frawley, 1997: 34, 48; Lad, 1984: 58–61). Trauma

causes Shen, or heart spirit, to scatter in TCM, causing insomnia, dissociation, and blocked Qi (Maciocia, 2009: 115, 153), which manifests as emotional numbness. The Buddhist perspective on trauma deepens dukkha by perpetuating the experience and avoidance of suffering. When suffering is hidden in the mind, it gets embedded in the mind, and one becomes paralyzed, unable to live (Rahula, 1959: 41; Hanh, 1998: 22). These schemes are applied in Kamal's novel to highlight elements of Zari's pain that are lost on Western psychiatrists, who tend to diagnose, symptomize, or simply explain it without adequate cultural or spiritual background.

Literature Review

This section reviews scholarship across five related areas, and identifies the specific gap this study addresses.

Trauma, Gender-Based Violence, and Literary Studies

- The foundational texts of trauma studies share a core awareness of the ways in which traumatic experience affects consciousness and narration. Trauma is not a memory that can be recalled, but is instead a memory that comes back in pieces, as Cathy Caruth shows. Judith Herman describes three phases of recovery: safety, mourning, and reconnection, and reveals how women survivors of sexual violence are just as severely affected as victims of political violence but are systematically overlooked in social structures. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest that testimony and active witnessing are needed to heal trauma. Roger Luckhurst historicizes these concerns, highlighting that suffering is always constituted as a social recognition of trauma, a social recognition that is always socially produced. Anne Whitehead shows how novelists use broken-up time and repetition to formally perform trauma, and how women's trauma is often depoliticized in literary depictions. Sara Ahmed challenges the psychological notion of emotions residing only in the internal to show that emotions such as fear and shame are not abstract, but are embedded in a discourse of nationalism and present on bodies. What Bessel van der Kolk's neuroscientific research shows is that traumatic memory is somatically, in the body, and therefore a body-based engagement is necessary for

healing. According to Noman Ali et al., trauma does not result in closure in South Asian literature but is also a lingering, unresolved presence (Ali et al., 2025). More recently, Saleem and Tariq (2026) have extended this discussion in considering the postcolonial trauma in Pakistani fiction which is not westerly closable, as culturally embedded mourning is essential to the transmission of trauma, and suggests the need for non-Western frameworks in trauma criticism.

Eastern Approaches to Trauma and Healing

Trauma studies to date are largely based on Western epistemological frameworks, whereas the Eastern medical and philosophical systems provide independent, systematic and coherent methods of understanding trauma, which share little in common with the Western clinical descriptions. (Frawley, 1997; Maciocia, 2009; Hanh, 1998) David Frawley illustrates how Ayurvedic psychology views trauma as an imbalance of the doshic; especially aggravating Vata, and as a loss of Ojas, the vital essence needed for resilience. The recovery involves the whole person through meditation, mantra and moral living. Vasant Lad explains how unprocessed Grief weakens Ojas and affects Prana, resulting in emotional fragility and loss of enthusiasm. In TCM, trauma breaks into the Shen and generates Hun-Shen separation, which is a feeling of the ethereal soul being separated from the corporeal soul, resulting in severe dissociation, says Giovanni Maciocia. Thich Nhat Hanh and Walpola Rahula together give us the Buddhist element, the suffering that is suppressed becomes a seed in consciousness and continues to grow - cycles of dukkha can only be broken through mindful awareness, seeing that everything is impermanent, and through loving-kindness and non-attachment. In a synthesis of these traditions and clinical psychology, Jon Kabat-Zinn and Deepak Chopra show that somatic and spiritual exercises offer avenues to healing that do not involve medication, especially when verbal expression is limited or dangerous.

South Asian Fiction and the Politics of Representation

South Asian fiction has always challenged the prevailing political and colonial discourses. The notion of the Third Space, developed by Homi K. Bhabha, shines a light on the mixed up, fractured self at the intersections of occupation and tradition. The question of Can the subaltern speak? posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highlights the limitations of representation for subaltern women. How patriarchal

systems work together with political interests to silence the female survivors is seen by Urvashi Butalia. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid depict women's bodies as theatre of cultural and political ideologies. Salman Rushdie speculates on the nature of fragmentation and nostalgia in the dislocated sense of time of survivors who have a past which is always colonizing their present. These scholars help to create a postcolonial feminist framework for Kamal's novel.

Conflict Literature and Women in Kashmir

There is growing but still little scholarship on women's experiences of the Kashmir conflict. In their study, *The Visual Narrative of Kashmir: Analyzing Conflict through Social Identity Theory* (2024), Syed Hussain et al. show how visual portrayals make Kashmiri women's plight into a political symbol, which forecloses their individual subjectivity. Mohammad Wani describes how Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety have become the common ailments of Kashmiri women, and how the emotional paralysis found in the novel is a clinical condition. Literary accounts of Kashmir offer an alternative account of the official history, and Shouket Tilwani celebrates the recent works of those that place the female perspective at the heart of the narration. In their paper, Adish and Mathew show how militarization affects home, body and memory and urge for an intersectional approach to analyze the impact of the militarization on Muslim Kashmiri women. These conditions are not far behind us but present now as Zainab Zafar's recent analysis has shown. Later, Bashir and Malik (2025) have explored the psycho-social vulnerability of women in the post-2019 Kashmir and given a contemporary context to the scholarly debates surrounding conflict, gender, and trauma.

Critical Scholarship on An Isolated Incident

Though important, the novel scholarship to date has not made use of the epistemologies of healing in the East to consider the novel in relation to trauma. Aziz et al. engaged the most thoroughly with the text, drawing on Herman's and Caruth's models to demonstrate how the novel's disjointed structure and character development of Zari mirror the clinical and narrative structures of PTSD. According to a study by corpus-based researchers Kashif Ali and Ali Raza Siddique, Kamal's linguistic hedging is the voice of the survivors who are traumatized and are speaking in a low-key, uncertain manner. In the novel's formal innovations, Suzanne Kamata places the narrative in the context of world literature of displacement. The novel's psychological acuity and political urgency have

been consistently praised by literary journalism in Dawn, The Express Tribune, Newslines, Kashmir Life, and Liberty Books, placing it among the best literary depictions of Kashmiri women's plight.

Research Gap

There is no study that has yet investigated this novel systemically as a primary analytical lens from the perspective of Eastern healing epistemologies (Ayurvedic medicine, TCM, or Buddhist philosophy). While there is no sustained engagement with Foucauldian biopolitics and Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory in Zari's text, the existing scholarship reads her trauma through Western clinical and narrative theory to generate a politically informed, epistemologically decolonized text. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is pluralistic, cross-cultural and politically inclusive. Trauma experienced in colonial occupation and in relation to gendered violence is embodied, spiritual, social and political. It cannot be captured in one single framework. These frameworks below are considered equally valid systems of knowledge and are entered into productive dialogue.

Ayurvedic Theory of Trauma

In *Ayurveda and the Mind* (1997), David Frawley shows how trauma affects the physiological and psychological functioning of the three doshas (Vata, Pitta and Kapha). Persistent fear and sadness make Vata dosha, which rules nervous system, senses and mind movements, hyperactive, restless, anxious, and disconnected. Similarly, Ojas—the vitality that gives psychological strength and steadiness to the person—is central. Persistent violence, sorrow and suppression drain the Ojas, and the person feels emotionally fragile and spiritually detached. Vasant Lad further elaborates in *Ayurveda: The Science of Self-Healing* (1984) how unprocessed grief can settle in the heart channel, diminishing Ojas and interrupting the flow of prana, resulting in a fragility of the emotions and loss of enthusiasm for life (Frawley, 1997: 34, 48, 134; Lad, 1984: 45, 58, 61).

Traditional Chinese Medicine Theory of Trauma

In *The Psyche in Chinese Medicine* (2009) and *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (2015), Giovanni Maciocia shows how the Shen (the

spirit or mind-consciousness in the Heart) is dispersed by trauma, leading to emotional volatility, mental restlessness, insomnia and dissociation. Trauma also blocks the flow of Qi, creating stagnation in the Liver and Heart Meridian which results in emotional repression, numbness, and spiritual disconnection. In severe dissociation, the person can be very mechanical and live in a state of feeling dead inside, which is one of the most precise TCM diagnoses, Hun-Shen separation, the separation of the ethereal soul (Hun) from corporeal soul (Po) (Maciocia, 2009: 115, 143, 245).

Buddhist Philosophy of Suffering and Recovery

Thich Nhat Hanh believes suppressed suffering gives rise to emotional paralysis, a form of latent or dormant seeds presents in consciousness, as mentioned in the book *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (1998: 22). The intensification of dukkha is samsaric entrapment, cyclical patterns of re-experiencing and avoidance, according to Walpola Rahula (1959: 41, 51) in *What the Buddha Taught*. The Buddhist practice of suffering, of becoming mindfully aware, of discovering the impermanence of things, of shedding the illusion of guilt stemming from the ego, of learning to be an attentive compassionate witness to the suffering and the experience of "life" provides a model for recovery which is nonlinear, nonverbal, and sensitive to the spiritual aspects of the healing process.

Cultural Trauma Theory and Foucauldian Theory of Power

According to Jeffrey Alexander (2004: 3), in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, cultural trauma is a situation in which a community feels it has been subjected to a traumatic event that has left a lasting impression on the group consciousness. Zari's tragedy is the tragedy of Kashmiri women as a whole, which is a trauma that has been unacknowledged and unspoken in the collective consciousness, which only accentuates and deepens itself further. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault shows how contemporary power is manifested in the internalization of surveillance, which results in docile bodies that police themselves with reference to their bodies, their voices, and their wishes. A trauma that is not just forced upon them as a result of external violence, but is also enforced through mechanisms of internal self-monitoring, is explained by Foucault's panopticism in Kashmir, a region where women's bodies are monitored by military checkpoints, honour codes, and religious nationalism (Foucault, 1977: 170, 196–203).

Analysis

Fear and Hypervigilance

Hypervigilance is the heightened and prolonged perception of threat stimuli. It is one of the most crippling symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. When threat is ever present in a conflict zone, it is no longer a discrete symptom, but a totalizing way of being—a permanent state of threat and loss of any sense of past or present, safety or danger. The hypervigilance that drives Zari is exactly this kind of atmosphere, one that circulates throughout all registers of her life's atmosphere.

Her reflexes in the form of folding the identification papers, her automatic evasion of soldiers' eyes, are not acts of prudence but acts of her internalized state surveillance. These are the mandatory ID cards, and the text elaborates on how Zari was able to reach her hands in the bag and pluck out the necessary documents without even glancing at the tips of their black boots as they rushed past her: "Zari's fingers found the required identification papers in her bag without even taking a glance at the tips of black boots as they hurried past" (Kamal, 2014: 6). The Ayurvedic view is that this is not a behavioral habit, it's a neurological residue: a nervous system that has been exposed to danger so many times that it's forgotten how to feel safe. The nervous system is permanently mobilized, or chronic Vata aggravation, as Frawley calls it (Frawley 1997: 134). The reading is enriched through Foucault's discussion of documentation as a tool for disciplinary control, which indicates how much power the state has over Zari's identity, and why she willingly submits to it as an automatism, not a conscious choice (Foucault, 1977: 196).

Zari walked a little faster, but this was in another voice, a speedier one, not that speed equals safety: Death was around every corner. Almost immediately, the key diagnostic characteristic comes to mind: Action prior to intention, body performing survival tactic before mind approves. The acceptance of speed as a hazard, followed immediately by the acceleration, is the interval between thinking about and doing, between knowing and feeling, between knowing and doing, between thinking and feeling. From a TCM perspective, this is the disorganized Shen, the heart-spirit without its place to reside, the mind without the ability to abide (Maciocia, 2009: 202). Van der Kolk's somatic approach reinforces the idea that Zari's hasty movement is not conscious choice but an automatic process of the body, playing out its survival mechanisms despite the conscious mind knowing that they are useless (van der Kolk, 2014: 87).

The most physical realization of Zari's hypervigilance is her inability to hold in her bladder, triggered by the sudden loud noises: "At the explosive noises she would wet herself" (Kamal, 2014: 232). This

somatic testimony of fear has no will, no social damping, no self-control. "It is not weakness of character, it is the most primitive of survival mechanisms of the body triumphing over the more differentiated functions of the mind, when Ojas has been used beyond the point of coordinated response" (Frawley, 1997: 142). The rawness of Kamal's depiction is on purpose; it was an intent to not aestheticize suffering and to not give the reader the comfort of a distance, a calm suffering. It demands trauma's unwelcoming, untamed corporeality. The duality of Zari's rosary as an object in search of spiritual sustenance and the overbearing auditory memory of gunfire in the next scene evokes the impossibility of her situation, as she seeks for consolation but is cut off by terror (Kamal, 2014: 235). The continuous repetition of this sound means that the mind cannot manage and assimilate the first experience, so it is stuck in what Rahula calls the samsaric quality of unprocessed dukkha—clinging to it not because it is of its choice, but because the mind cannot manage it (Rahula, 1959: 42).

Even when she is cared for, she's an occasion of fear; "Zari stood in the center of the room, her eyes threatening to brim over at his kindness, shrinking at the threat of the enclosed space, at him" (Kamal, 2014: 173). Billy's kindness brings them down instead of up. What is exposed here is the underlying dynamics of a traumatized psyche: security has become questionable. The nervous system has become accustomed to seeing intensity as a threat and no longer distinguishes between threat and care. Generosity is too much to bear. This is precisely what Foucault's notion of the normalized body explains: a body that has been trained by other bodies' regimes of control to read every intensity is the onset of pain, and pleasure itself is a calm before another assault (Foucault, 1977: 199).

It is not only Zari who is hypervigilant, but the novel's male characters as well, making it a collective phenomenon. Billy's nervous system starts responding to Kashmir's trauma charged environment before his conscious mind takes in the danger. Collective hyperarousal is evident in the bombing scene: "boom boom boom, the kilim jumped out of its threads" (Kamal, 2014: 341). The metaphor of the kilim jumping out of its threads is the most accurate in the novel to describe how the experience of trauma tears apart the fabric of reality; it doesn't just shake the rug so we will know we stepped on it, it takes apart the fabric itself. Hypervigilance reveals not pathology, but rationality: the rational adaptation of human nervous systems when the mechanisms of surveillance and violence have fully infiltrated every aspect of daily life to the extent that the difference between outside monitoring and the monitoring of the self is no longer discernible.

Isolation and Withdrawal

Zari's isolation is not just a withdrawal from social interaction, but an ontological withdrawal, the gradual disconnection of the self from memory, language and the interpersonal relations that sustain identity in normal life. It is only by reading it as a political symptom that its depth is captured as well as its political dimensions. She is isolated because society and politics have made her suffer beyond description and denied her the recognition that is needed to heal.

After two months, her avoidance of eye contact, which “She had not looked anyone in the eye these past two months” (Kamal, 2014: 38), indicates that the capacity to relate is more than just a shy or socially anxious response. The most basic gesture of mutual recognition, the proclamation that one is present and is willing to be seen, is eye contact. The prolonged lack speaks of Zari's inability to live into her own visibility without flinching. The Vata that fear creates are aggravated, causing the person to be overwhelmed by external sensations, as well as to have hyperactivity on the internal level which renders contact painful (Frawley, 1997: 59). The averted gaze is also, at the same time, a practice of the body; a body learned to be small when visible under the observation of the military and the patriarchal powers: visibility under military and patriarchal observation is dangerous – for the body has learned how to make itself small (Foucault, 1977: 202).

Her physical hiding in the guest room, from which she only comes out “at meal times... waiting to escape back to the sanctuary of the guest room” (Kamal, 2014: 63) suggests how much the world outside is a threat and how much safety could be found in complete enclosure. The guest room has importance as a space: liminal, provisional, designed for visitors, not for residents. It is his or her only sanctuary, that it is Zari's. In TCM, when the Shen goes inward because of grief and shock, then these are exactly what are observed—poor interpersonal responses, isolation, and failure to live in the here and now (Maciocia, 2009: 243). The room is at the same time safe haven and prison.

Zari hopes that someone would have been able to explain what was happening to the stain coming out of the fabric, an understatement of the poverty of her social world:

Zari was stunned as Billy slowly closed the door. Later she would have wanted to tell someone that most of the stains had been removed but there wasn't anyone to share such information with. There were no other people with whom she could share her life, except for the spirits. (Kamal, 2014: 78)

This impulse to communicate a little house joy—so commonplace it could be a joke, so tender because it cannot get expressed—suggests that the relational ability of the subject, Zari, is intact but lacking in a social mechanism by which it can express itself. She just wants to talk yet there is only the dead to talk to. Spirits: not mystical, but diagnostic, a dividing line between the living and the dead is the most salient for a woman whose social world she has been completely removed from. This is exactly what happens when Ojas is depleted: ordinary human satisfaction is impossible even when it does occur for a short time (Frawley, 1997: 59). The structural silence is not just an individual phenomenon but the result of years of institutional and communal silence, where expression is dangerous – even in seemingly safe family settings.

Unpacked bags signify Zari's existential homelessness: “She had not unpacked any of the drawings Miraage had made for her. There were no personal things... she was obviously still residing in her suitcase” (Kamal, 2014: 216). When people unpack, they claim belonging, they do affirm commitment to a place, to a “right to reside.” They make a claim to a present. This refusal, or inability to do so, on Zari's part is a point Alexander considers the disassembling of belonging in the middle of cultural trauma: the survivor who carries the wound by herself, who has lost her own past, and who has lost any claim to the present (Alexander 2004: 1).

Guilt and Self-Blame

Guilt and self-blame are the worst interior dimension of Zari's trauma, the wound she inflicts upon herself in reaction to the original trauma, and which the community works to exacerbate. Zari's guilt is not so much a reaction to events as an all-encompassing condition of being, enveloping her relationship to her own existence.

The most purely ontological utterance of this guilt occurs in the question: “She wondered if there was something wrong with her. A normal person would have died... Why was she still alive?” (Kamal, 2014: 34). The invertedness of this place is meticulous and incisive — life is the absence of life, death the presence of death. Here is not just survivor's guilt, it's a simple question of existence. This is exactly this kind of existential self-negation that occurs when Ojas is catastrophically depleted when sustained fear and grief take over the mind, transforming its capacity to be kind and compassionate to itself into a capacity to be destructive and hurtful to itself (Lad, 1984: 100). The self that endured the unsurvivable is not able to make sense out of its existence, coexisting with the absence of the dead.

Hallucination is a tool used to further intensify guilt. Zari's memories of her dead brother become persecution: "Baz's sweet face looked at her, grinning, then crumpling up, accusing her" (Kamal, 2014: 48). It is an alchemy of self-blame and the sweetness becomes the very fuel of the accusation: love becomes the very thing that is accused, and the most loved one is the most accusing one. This is the mind's Shen that has been so affected by loss that it becomes an instrument for prosecution, bringing the internal tribunal that is absent in the external structures, the structures that have not been able to resolve the issue (Maciocia, 2009: 143).

The third dimension is even more revealing in the case of self-harm: "She'd run the teeth of a razor over her forearm... she'd hoped to feel pain, but she felt relief" (Kamal, 2014: 59). The lack of pain, the feeling of relief—that is not resilience, but an incredibly hollowing out. The mind, so numb to the pain inside itself, that the pain outside feels like liberation. The razor is a weapon of self-destruction and an illusion of control; the only mode of control that trauma has left available. The displacement of the intolerable inner pain onto the tolerable outer sensation is what feels like relief. This is the second arrow, the suffering we cause ourselves when we try to heal the original wound, and it does not heal dukkha but adds to it; self-harm to the original wound (Hanh, 1998: 52).

It is obvious that Zari is a damaged goods, and a dented can of soup is not. This commodity metaphor is not coincidental. It embodies market logic of the honour culture of men, where the social value of a woman depends on her sexual inviolability. A sense of "damaged goods" is not a private assessment, but a verdict of community culture that Zari has internalized, so she has become the community's judge and jury. Foucault's (1977: 194) concept of the internalization of the social gaze is quite illuminating here: the gaze of others is no longer a gaze but the gaze of oneself, the judgment of others becomes the judgment of oneself.

The communal aspect of Zari's guilt is most clearly stated in Shehla's complaint: "'It is your fault,' Shehla said... 'You brought Zari here!... You and her Khala have sent my son to his death'" (Kamal, 2014: 252–253). In this community, the function of the scapegoat is done: the community takes its own unprocessed grief and rage and channeled it through the most susceptible person in sight, the survivor who lived, while others did not. The effect is to legitimate and reinforce Zari's own sense of guilt, and to add a second wound of social making, and redoubling. She would then be caught up in the drive for restitution that ensues: though she'd been unable to save her own family, this family she would help preserve in whatever way possible (Lad, 1984: 105)—Pitta

overcompensation, as Ayurveda identifies it, immersing herself in external responsibilities in lieu of the need for self-care. She is not content to bring healing and salvation to others; she wants to heal herself (Kamal, 2014: 287).

Emotional Numbness and Dissociation

Dissociation is the most extreme defensive reaction that the psyche has to the most intense trauma and refers to a disruption in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion and perception. When suffering becomes too much for the self to handle, the self-dissociates from suffering, and although it survives physically, it is no longer able to be fully present psychologically. Kamal conveys Zari's dissociations in different registers—perceptual, temporal, social, somatic and spiritual—with such precision that this is one of the most complex literary depictions of dissociative experience in modern south Asian fiction.

The basic structure of the dissociation in Zari is set out in one very paradoxical sentence: "She could see and hear everything, but nothing was really seen or heard" (Kamal, 2014: 33). Zari has a normal sense of smell, taste, sight, hearing, and touch. Her organs of perception continue to function. The inner apparatus where sensory data gets converted to felt experience, where seeing is meaningful, listening is resonant, present sense is inhabitable, has gone dark. The perceptual surfaces are left behind, but their meaning-making ability has been lost. In Ayurvedic terms, this is Sadhaka Pitta depletion, the sub-dosha responsible for the mental digestion of experiences into emotion. Sustained trauma can trigger when experiences come in, but cannot be integrated, assigned meaning to, or experienced as part of a lived self (Frawley, 1997:87). The effect is what Kamal calls "phenomenology without its content, form without substance.

Transpersonally, she is involved in a social presentation that is similar to her dissociation. Zari is characterized as a "dry-eyed fortress of pleases and thank-yous" (Kamal, 2014: 63). The fortress is a perfect metaphor – anything within must feel vulnerable, yet it looks safe from any attack. It is not etiquette but armour that is politeness. The particular characteristics of the dryness and formulaic regularity and emotional flatness set it apart from composure. Maciocia defines Shen uprooting as the person's speech and actions are normal but they have no feeling of connection with their own words and are completely devoid of spontaneity (2009: 350). The pleases and thank yews do not indicate what it is that Zari is feeling inside, but rather, what she is supposed to feel.

The present is ill in Zari's relationship with time, as there is “intense longing for the past, but also a savage mourning for the lack of a future” (Kamal, 2014: 66). Both time orientations are too heavy to bear: the past is too painful to be lived in; future is just unimaginable. She inhabits a present that is not present; a temporal limbo from which direction and meaning have been exiled. This is the *vritti* which Frawley describes in Ayurvedic psychology as the condition of repeated unresolved pain that no longer has an outlet or resolution (Frawley, 1997: 101).

The most extreme form of dissociation is to split oneself from experience: “go on, go on, go on... her body and spirit become mechanical and immobilized feeling” (Kamal, 2014: 223). At this moment Zari experiences depersonalization to such an extent that she becomes two: the body functioning in its mechanical capacity, and the spirit that goes into suspension: immobilized by what is too much to be felt. This is the separation of the *Hun* and the *Shen*, the ethereal soul and the corporeal soul, which results in a great disconnection from the sensation of the body, its emotional responses, and its sense of self, all of which are aspects of the corporeal soul (Maciocia, 2009: 245). “Go on, go on, go on” is both Zari's instructions to herself to go on going on, and the proof that going on is the only way.

The most formally innovative sentence of the novel is Zari's most deliberately wished-for dissociation: “She could dredge up that evening, her rape, but she could go no deeper than that. She. Would. Not. The stuttering punctuation does the psychological barrier. Each monosyllable—She. Would. Not. —is a door closing. Zari is able to reach the surface fact of her rape and not its emotional reality. This is not healing; it is its postponement: It may be necessary for survival; but, it is also the continuation of the very cycle of *dukkha* which awareness can break (Rahula, 1959: 74). It is the three monosyllables that are the strongest in the novel, not because they embody strength, but because they embody what has been cut off from the project of not feeling: the fullness of a self and its reduction to bare determination.

Discussion

The analysis showed that aspects of Zari's trauma were systematically ignored by the western clinical paradigm, but became fully readable in the interdisciplinary approach created in this paper. There were some overarching implications that ensued.

The Eastern frameworks first conceptualized Zari's trauma as a non-psychiatric disorder that existed ontologically, spiritually and energetically in all dimensions of her life. The one thing that Ayurveda had emphasized – the unity of body, mind and spirit – was what resonated with her somatic depth of suffering, which symptom catalogues could not. Her hypervigilance was an aggravation of Vata in her nervous system and her dissociation was either a depletion or a Sadhaka Pitta imbalance that was affecting the mind's integrative ability. In the spiritual dimension of dissociation, being a body without a spirit, or a form without its content, TCM gave us equally precise vocabularies in the shape of scattering and separating the Shen, and Hun and Shen. These were not poetic figures but rigorous diagnostic frameworks with their own inner logic, healing implications.

The temporal and ethical concepts of Buddha contributed the aspects not fully covered in Ayurveda and TCM. The avoidance that continued to propagate dharma made Zari's entrapment in the mind as it was. The avoidance that never stopped, but was only continued, was the very reason that structured his mental entrapment. Though understandable as a survival tactic, her unwillingness, “She. Would. Not,” maintained the cycle of suffering instead of breaking it. The Buddhist ethos of healing through mindfulness, non-verbal, non-ego means was very appealing in places where talking about trauma was prohibited or even deadly, as it did not need to be verbally expressed to be effective. This provided a healing scheme that was not only available to Zari, but quite different from the one used in the West, which relied on verbal expression and social recognition.

Combining Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory and Foucault's theory of disciplinary power surfaces a political construction of Zari's trauma experience that neither theory could achieve on its own. Alexander showed that her trauma was the manifestation of an unrecognized wound – the wound of a whole community of Kashmiri women, who had suffered in a systematic manner, without ever being treated or recognized. How this denial of recognition works and is reproduced, Foucault explained, was by internalized surveillance, by the disciplining of the body into complicity with its own subjugation, by the production of docile subjects who policed themselves. Zari's self-monitoring, her averted gaze and her enforced silence were not individual shortcomings, but a consequence of a biopolitical regime that had managed to colonize her subjectivity.

A traumatized person as an isolated individual would have been a way of engaging in exactly the politicization Kamal's novel fought against. It's not a study of PTSD, it's a political document in novel form, a document that showed, most intimately, the impact of structural violence

on the mind, and the ways in which the psychic wounds are then compounded and used for political ends by the cultural systems that are supposed to be healing them. It was a political witness to read it with a critically strong, and culturally pluralist, and politically aware reading lens.

The implications went beyond this text. Trauma research has had a Euro-American focus on articulating verbally, the coherence of the narrative, and the individual's sense of healing as the basis of healing. These criteria were not just insufficient, but counterproductive to women's survival in non-Western settings, especially to those who were silenced and where social recognition was denied by others. Eastern epistemologies had theories that were not only more culturally relevant, but were also more focused on the embodied, spiritual, and collective aspects of suffering. Van der Kolk's somatic neuroscience provided the clinical footing: He emphasized that healing of trauma required addressing both body and spirit, along with mind, and that the journey toward healing would not be accomplished without the help of breath, ritual and the progressive reintegration of inner balance – something that Ayurveda, TCM, and Buddhist philosophy long recognized (van der Kolk, 2014: 87).

Conclusion

In the entire body of literature on South Asian wars, *An Isolated Incident* stood out from the crowd for its unabashed depiction of militarized occupation and gender-based violence in Kashmir. More importantly, it did this by the inner lives of a female survivor who is rendered psychologically and culturally acutely. In Zari case, Kamal offered a literary anatomy of trauma, which she describes in four overlapping aspects: somatic vigilance of the hypervigilant body; social, ontological collapse of isolation and withdrawal; corrosive interior damage of guilt and self-blame; and the spectral quality of a life lived in emotional and spiritual dissociation. This paper has suggested that Zari's trauma needed to be critically read alongside Eastern healing epistemologies and Western clinical and political theory. The suffering she struggled with was revealed to her through Ayurveda, TCM and Buddhist philosophy as embodied, energetic and spiritual, which a categorical Western framework failed to do. Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory placed her personal suffering in a collective unacknowledged wound. Foucault's concept of disciplinary power was an analysis of the mechanisms by which that wound was sustained, reproduced and internalized through the mechanisms of surveillance and biopolitical control. There were three contributions to be made from this study.

Literarily, it proved that Kamal's novel was psychologically complex and culturally specific, beyond the scope of its local, orthodox readers, who were required to perform "theoretically advanced" and "epistemologically plural" readings. It theoretically argued that non-Western epistemologies could be included in trauma studies as equally valid analytical frameworks. Politically, it argued that reading the literature of suffering was a political act and that whose suffering was taken as a political act depended on whose frameworks one brought to the act of reading. In an era where conflict women were still experiencing the multiple forms of military occupation, patriarchal discipline, and enforced silence, criticism that engaged in reading such literature with all of the theoretical equipment of the East and West celebrated both the survivors who had inspired it as well as the discipline that had sustained it.

References

- Adish, A., & Mathew, R. (2024). A Kashmiri woman stuck in crossfire: Exploring the impact of militarization on everyday lives in Farah Bashir's *Rumours of Spring*. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 20(4), 972–973.
- Ahmad, P., & Balamurgan. (2020). Emotional exhaustion among women in conflict-affected Kashmir. *Journal of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences*, 8(2), 7040–7045.
- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Alexander, J. C. (2004). *Cultural trauma and collective identity*. University of California Press.
- Ali, K., & Siddique, A. R. (2021). Hedges in Pakistani English novels: A corpus-based study. *Pakistan Journal of Language Studies*, 5(1), 23–27.
- Ali, N., Saeed, M., Farid, & Rehan, M. (2025). Trauma and memory in South Asian partition literature. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 7(2), 1571–1573.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Amnesty International. (1995). *Annual report 1995*. Amnesty International Publications.
- Amjad, R. (2018). Political insurgency and its socioeconomic impact on Kashmiri women. *South Asian Journal of Sociology*, 5(1), 10–18.

- Aziz, S., Cheema, B. A., & Nawaz, S. (2023). The representation of post-war trauma in Soniah Kamal's *An Isolated Incident*. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 11(1), 37–40.
- Bashir, F., & Malik, S. (2025). Digital surveillance and psycho-social vulnerabilities of women in post-2019 Kashmir. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 13(1), 45–62.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Butalia, U. (1998). *The other side of silence: Voices from the partition of India*. Viking.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chopra, D., & Simon, D. (1996). *Training the mind, healing the body*. Harmony Books.
- Dawn. (2014). *An isolated incident*: A haunting exploration of trauma and survival. Dawn News.
- Express Tribune. (2014). *An isolated incident*: In first novel. The Express Tribune.
- Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Frawley, D. (1997). *Ayurveda and the mind: The healing of consciousness*. Lotus Press.
- Gopinath, G. (2005). *Impossible desires: Queer diasporas and South Asian public cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Hanh, T. N. (1998). *The heart of the Buddha's teaching*. Broadway Books.
- Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence*. Basic Books.
- Human Rights Watch. (1993). *Rape in Kashmir: A crime of war*. Human Rights Watch.
- Hussain, S., et al. (2024). The visual narrative of Kashmir: Analyzing conflict through social identity theory. *Media and Communication*, 12(1).
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living*. Bantam Books.
- Kamal, S. (2014). *An isolated incident*. Prakash Books India Pvt. Ltd.
- Kamata, S. (2013). Asian American South: Spotlight: Ha Jin. In R. Mark & R. Vaughan (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to literature of the US South* (pp. 143–144). Routledge.

- Kaplan, E. A. (2014). *Trauma and cinema: Cross-cultural explorations*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Kashmir Life. (2014). *An isolated incident*: Review. Kashmir Life.
- Lad, V. (1984). *Ayurveda: The science of self-healing*. Lotus Press.
- Laub, D. (1992). An event without a witness: Truth, testimony and survival. In S. Felman & D. Laub (Eds.), *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history* (pp. 75–92). Routledge.
- Liberty Books. (2014). *An isolated incident*: Review. Liberty Books.
- Luckhurst, R. (2008). *The trauma question*. Routledge.
- Maciocia, G. (2009). *The psyche in Chinese medicine: Treatment of emotional and mental disharmonies with acupuncture and Chinese herbs*. Churchill Livingstone.
- Maciocia, G. (2015). *The foundations of Chinese medicine: A comprehensive text* (3rd ed.). Elsevier.
- Médecins Sans Frontières. (2015). Kashmir mental health survey 2015. MSF.
- Newsline Magazine. (2014). *An isolated incident*: Review. Newsline.
- Rahula, W. (1959). *What the Buddha taught*. Grove Press.
- Rushdie, S. (1991). *Imaginary homelands: Essays and criticism 1981–1991*. Granta Books.
- Saleem, A., & Tariq, M. (2026). Mourning rituals and postcolonial trauma in Pakistani fiction. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 62(1), 78–95.
- Sangari, K., & Vaid, S. (Eds.). (1989). *Recasting women: Essays in colonial history*. Kali for Women.
- Spivak, G. C. (1999). *A critique of postcolonial reason: Toward a history of the vanishing present*. Harvard University Press.
- Tadiar, N. X. M. (2009). *Things fall away: Philippine historical experience and the makings of globalization*. Duke University Press.
- Tilwani, S. (2022). Narrative ideology and repercussions: Representation of the Kashmir conflict in modern literature. *Research Journal of Social Sciences and Economics Review*, 3(3), 348–349.
- van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.
- Wani, M. (2014). Study of mental health among the people affected by terrorism in Kashmir. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 4(1), 70–71.
- Whitehead, A. (2004). *Trauma fiction*. Edinburgh University Press.

Zafar, Z. (2025). The war on Kashmiri women's bodies: Five years after Article 370. Independent Analysis.