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Unveiling Cultural Trauma in Deborah Ellis' *Parvana's Journey*

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ABSTRACT

This research examines and explores cultural trauma and its effects on the protagonist portrayed in Deborah Ellis's *Parvana Journey*. The objective of the study was to explore the effect of cultural trauma. The methodology of the study shows that the study is qualitative in approach and secondary techniques used in analysis and data collection. The study collects different passages from the novel related to the Cultural Trauma and then used for the data analysis. For the purpose of data analysis, the passages have been divided into different sections. These sections have been divided on the basis of study objectives. The data analysis of the study was based on the textual analysis technique. The results show that the protagonist faced different problem and Parvana and her companions face several challenges, including the threat of violence, malnutrition, and the harsh Afghan winter. They encounter those who provide aid along the path, as well as those who exploit their vulnerabilities. The analysis showed that the protagonist handle all the problems; Parvana demonstrates remarkable resilience, resourcefulness, and empathy throughout the journey, often taking up the role of the group's leader. Biggest problem for Parvana is the inability to build a fence against fear amid the inner chaos. That is why conflicting feelings seem to frequent her mind persistently. When her father is imprisoned, Parvana realizes she must step up and become the breadwinner for her family. She cuts her hair and disguises herself as a boy, venturing into the streets to sell goods and earn money. This transformation is not only physically demanding but also emotionally challenging, as she has to constantly hide her true identity. Parvana's ability to adapt to the situation and create a new identity for herself demonstrates her resilience and determination to do whatever it takes to support her family.

Keywords: Cultural Trauma, Transformation, Identity Hurdles, Fear, Challenges.

Introduction

The occurrence of cultural trauma arises when a society experiences very distressing events with a profound influence on its people and culture. Trauma is a psychological and emotional response to an unpleasant, distressing, or painful experience or series

of events. Such incidents may pose bodily or mental risks and often surpass an individual's ability to cope or handle them. Trauma may disrupt an individual's perception of safety, trust, and overall functioning, leading to enduring effects on mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Cultural trauma is a term used to describe the psychological and emotional effects of traumatic events on a society's culture, identity, and memories that are experienced collectively. It refers to how a society recalls and reacts to important historical traumas that might change its stories, symbols, and principles (Jaffery, 2004).

Cultural trauma refers to the connections formed between past events, structures, perceptions, and behaviors that were previously unrelated, resulting in new and significant meanings and causes. A novel scientific paradigm sheds insight on a developing area of social responsibility and political action (Ellis, 2000). Cultural trauma occurs when members of a group believe they have experienced a significant and lasting event that profoundly affects their collective consciousness, leaving indelible imprints on their memories and permanently altering their future identity in fundamental and irreparable ways. Regarding cultural trauma, individuals have consistently employed the terminology of trauma to elucidate their personal experiences and those of the groups they belong to (Hawkin, 2009). Cultural trauma emerged as an optimal framework for examining the tremendous impact of historical events on a nation's cultural identity. It explores the profound and aberrant methods by which society has addressed significant historical wounds, such as war, colonization, genocide, and so forth. The development of cultural trauma is not a process that occurs within a short period. It predates it by a significant amount. It emphasizes human suffering resulting from the substantial and intricate disparity between social and political factions. According to the cultural trauma hypothesis, traumatic experiences may deeply impact both an individual's psychological state and a society's shared memory, identity, and stories. As people cope with the aftermath of terrible events, their personal issues and advancements get intertwined with shared cultural experiences.

The indistinct depictions of Afghan women and children are frequently exhibited in circumstances that are vulnerable to violence due to protracted wars, ethnic disputes, and Taliban governance (Augstina & Ramalia, 2017). Their portrayals of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and food scarcity in various regions of the world often reach media consumption. Children and women were the most vulnerable victims of war crimes in Afghanistan, according to research. Over 3,000 cases of violence were documented by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) during the initial six months of the Afghan year beginning March 21, 2012 (Hasrat, 2012). Violence against women is widely acknowledged as an element in Afghan society. This study provides an overview of various forms of violence perpetrated against women during the initial half of the year. In addition to statistical data, the study showcases vivid instances of violence depicting a horrifying reality. Foreign media outlets feature stories regarding the prevalence of violence, human trafficking, and abuse as significant problems in Afghanistan.

The political and social environment of Afghanistan, alongside various regimes and conflicts, have significantly contributed to the intricate and changing circumstances faced by women over time. Afghan women's rights and duties have been historically shaped by cultural, religious, and political forces (Hamidi, 2014). Before the Taliban's

rise in the 1990s, Afghan women had significant roles in socioeconomic domains such as politics, business, and education. During Taliban control from 1996 to 2001, women's rights were significantly curtailed, with limits imposed on their involvement in public life, employment, and education. Multiple sources, including the 1999 study *Women Under the Taliban* by Human Rights Watch and the 2001 report *Afghanistan: Women Under Siege* by Amnesty International, substantiate this claim. Following the Taliban removal in 2001, measures improved women's rights and involvement in Afghan society. Contemporary women enjoy more opportunities in healthcare, education, and political engagement.

Following ethnic struggle and civil war, a newly established Islamic militia, the Taliban, emerges as a dominant force pledging peace. Most Afghans, fatigued by prolonged drought, starvation, and conflict, support the Taliban for adherence to traditional Islamic principles. The Taliban prohibit poppy growing for opium trade, enforce strict crime measures, restrict women's access to school and jobs, mandate full veiling, and forbid women from going outside unaccompanied (Jan, 2022). The implementation of Islamic law includes public executions and amputations. The United States rejects Taliban legitimacy. Taliban restrictions confine Afghans within the nation, forcing many to seek asylum abroad (Nasrullah et al., 2014).

Since the Taliban's defeat on December 7, 2001, Afghanistan has not seen expected quality of life improvements. The government faces challenges addressing poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, and lack of healthcare and shelter. Girls' dropout rates remain high; adult literacy is low with only 39% over 15 able to read and write (BBC, 2014).

Despite advances, violence against women persists. The top three offenses recorded in 2010 are physical beatings, forced marriage, and lack of economic assistance. The study highlights new violence types, such as obstruction of women's participation in social activities. Afghanistan has the lowest per capita gross national income in Asia in 2010. In six months, 3,331 violence instances were recorded, including physical, verbal, psychological, economic, and sexual violence (Hasrat, 2012).

Social problems mainly emerged due to ethnic conflicts, civil war, and Taliban rule. Gender inequality and patriarchal culture contribute to societal issues. Many women and children suffered neglect, poverty, and homelessness. These conditions caused mass refugee displacement to Pakistan and neighboring countries (Jackson et al., 2019).

There is a lack of understanding about gender and sexuality, resulting in gender disparities. Sex refers to biological classification; gender refers to cultural valuation based on accepted femininity and masculinity. Gender and power dynamics are socially produced (Baden, 2000).

Gender identities and roles vary among cultures and within societies. Gendered power dynamics permeate social institutions. Women face gender-based discrimination globally in family, community, market, and state sectors (Baden, 2000).

Gender violence occurs publicly and privately worldwide, often from known males. Data is limited due to underreporting. Violence, including rape, is used strategically in warfare against ethnic groups.

Literature Review

The notion of cultural trauma has been widely examined in social theory, highlighting the way traumatic events reshape collective identities and memories. Jeffrey C.

Alexander et al. (2004) describe cultural trauma as a process where a community experiences a profound disruption that fundamentally alters its identity and social fabric. Cultural trauma develops as communities construct narratives to make sense of suffering and loss, integrating trauma into collective memory and social discourse. This framework offers critical insight into how societies interpret and cope with events like war, genocide, or political repression.

Eyerman (2001) underscores the role of collective memory in trauma, emphasizing how social groups use shared narratives to process and heal from traumatic experiences. This process not only preserves the memory of suffering but also serves as a mechanism for rebuilding social cohesion. Bar-On (2012) extends this perspective by arguing that trauma can become a catalyst for social change, influencing collective identity formation and political dynamics.

In the context of Afghanistan, the experiences of women and children under Taliban rule provide a vivid example of cultural trauma's impact. Augstina and Ramalia (2017) document the vulnerabilities of Afghan women and children to violence, displacement, and poverty due to prolonged conflict and oppressive governance. Their work highlights how systemic violence becomes normalized in conflict zones, producing widespread social and psychological trauma.

Hasrat (2012) provides statistical evidence of violence against Afghan women, documenting thousands of incidents ranging from physical abuse to economic deprivation. These findings reveal a society grappling with entrenched patriarchal norms compounded by ongoing instability. Hamidi (2014) discusses how the Taliban's strict enforcement of Islamic law severely curtailed women's rights, banning education and employment, and imposing restrictive social codes. This regime's policies entrenched gender inequalities and contributed to a collective experience of trauma among women.

Despite the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan women continue to face significant barriers. BBC (2014) reports on the ongoing challenges of violence, limited access to education, and economic marginalization. These enduring struggles reflect the persistent nature of cultural trauma, which transcends political change to shape social realities.

Feminist literary criticism provides valuable tools for analyzing *Parvana's Journey*. Scholars like Plain and Sellers (2007) and Kailash (2018) highlight the novel's interrogation of gender roles and patriarchal oppression. The protagonist's male disguise and survival tactics challenge traditional gender norms and expose the harsh realities faced by Afghan girls under Taliban rule.

Marshall and Sensoy (2009) analyze Parvana's cross-dressing as a survival strategy that challenges rigid gender roles. This transformation becomes a form of resistance to Taliban-imposed norms, allowing Parvana access to freedoms denied to girls. Their study reveals how gender and identity intersect with trauma and resilience in conflict settings.

Monika (2023) explores the masculine traits Parvana adopts, such as independence and bravery, arguing that these characteristics are essential for survival in a hostile environment. This analysis deepens understanding of how gender performance is adapted and redefined in trauma narratives.

Children's war literature frequently portrays the tension between victimhood and resilience. Meade and Hanks (1999) examine the *Parvana* trilogy's contribution to this

genre, showing how Ellis captures the lived realities of Afghan children. The novels depict trauma not as a fixed state but as a condition negotiated through relationships, hope, and survival strategies.

Engy (2019) critiques the film adaptation *The Breadwinner*, emphasizing its depiction of Muslim women's experiences under Taliban rule and the potential for Western narratives to both highlight and oversimplify complex realities. This critique complements literary analyses by situating *Parvana's Journey* within broader geopolitical discourses.

Hiqma and Tenia (2017) employ framing analysis to explore violence against Afghan women and girls, focusing on victimization and survival strategies, such as adopting male identities. Their work aligns closely with themes in *Parvana's Journey*, offering empirical support for the novel's portrayal of gendered trauma.

The scholarship reveals a rich interdisciplinary conversation about cultural trauma, gender, and identity, providing the theoretical and empirical foundation for analyzing *Parvana's Journey*. This literature underscores the novel's significance as a cultural text that reflects and challenges the realities of Afghan women and children.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies Jeffrey C. Alexander's Theory of Cultural Trauma to analyze *Parvana's Journey*. Alexander (1982) argues that cultural trauma arises when a collective is subjected to a traumatic event that leaves indelible marks on group consciousness, reshaping identity and social order. Cultural trauma is constructed through narratives that communities develop to interpret and make meaning of suffering.

In the context of *Parvana's Journey*, this theory helps frame Parvana's personal trauma within Afghanistan's broader cultural trauma. Her psychological and social struggles embody the collective suffering and fractured identity resulting from war, displacement, and gender oppression.

The theory also highlights how trauma evolves over time, mediated through cultural symbols, rituals, and memory. Parvana's journey reflects this ongoing process, as she negotiates identity, memory, and resilience amid upheaval.

Methodology

A qualitative textual analysis was conducted, focusing on passages from *Parvana's Journey* that depict cultural trauma, gender oppression, and survival strategies. The analysis draws on theoretical insights from cultural trauma theory and feminist criticism to interpret the text.

Secondary sources from the document were used to contextualize Parvana's experiences within the social and political realities of Afghanistan under Taliban rule. This approach enabled a nuanced examination of the novel's themes and character development.

Data Analysis

Deborah Ellis's *Parvana's Journey* narrates the story of a young girl living in Afghanistan during Taliban rule, a time marked by violence, poverty, and social oppression. The novel opens with the family's disruption as Parvana's father is arrested by the Taliban, a turning point that thrusts the family into destitution. This personal loss reflects the broader societal collapse under the Taliban, where countless families suffered similar fates.

Forced into the role of breadwinner, Parvana cuts her hair and disguises herself as a boy, taking the name "Kaseem." This transformation is crucial for survival since the Taliban severely restrict women's movement and access to work. Parvana's assumption of a male identity exemplifies how individuals adapt to oppressive circumstances, challenging the rigid gender norms of their society (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009). This cross-dressing is not only a survival tactic but a symbolic resistance to patriarchal control (Hiqma & Tenia, 2017).

Throughout the journey, Parvana confronts numerous challenges that illustrate the material and psychological consequences of cultural trauma. Villages lay in ruins, fields are littered with landmines, and food is scarce. Parvana and her companions suffer from hunger, cold, and exhaustion. These hardships reflect the widespread devastation of Afghanistan's landscape and economy, reinforcing the trauma experienced by individuals (Augstina & Ramalia, 2017).

The psychological impact of trauma on Parvana is portrayed with sensitivity. She experiences fear, confusion, and loneliness, emotions exacerbated by the constant threat of violence and the instability of her environment. Parvana's internal conflict between her male disguise and female identity highlights the fragmentation of self often caused by trauma (Baden, 2000). Her struggle to maintain safety while preserving her sense of identity exemplifies the dual burden borne by those living under cultural trauma.

Parvana's encounters with other displaced children emphasize the collective nature of trauma. She meets orphans and refugees, all bearing the scars of war and displacement. Their shared experiences foster solidarity and communal support, which are critical for psychological survival (Augstina & Ramalia, 2017). The novel portrays these relationships as vital for maintaining hope and humanity amid chaos (Kailash, 2018).

The theme of loss permeates Parvana's journey. The death of her father, the separation from her mother, and the constant threat of death around her underscore the pervasive grief experienced by those living in war zones (Hamidi, 2014). Parvana's losses mirror the collective losses of Afghan society, highlighting cultural trauma's extensive reach (Jaffery, 2004).

Despite overwhelming adversity, Parvana exhibits resilience and courage. She assumes leadership roles, cares for younger children, and makes difficult decisions to protect her group. These behaviors reveal how trauma survivors develop coping mechanisms that enable survival and growth (Meade & Hanks, 1999). Parvana's strength demonstrates the human capacity to endure and resist even the harshest conditions (Marshall & Sensoy, 2009).

The novel also addresses the gendered dimensions of trauma. Parvana's necessity to assume a male identity reflects the extreme gender oppression imposed by the Taliban (Hiqma & Tenia, 2017). Women's exclusion from public life forces girls like Parvana into dangerous and psychologically complex roles (Baden, 2000). The story critiques the patriarchal structures that exacerbate cultural trauma by restricting freedom and agency (Kailash, 2018).

The Taliban's oppressive rule is depicted as a source of fear and violence, intensifying the trauma experienced by civilians. Their enforcement of strict social controls, including public executions and amputations, fosters a climate of terror. Parvana's

encounters with Taliban soldiers and their brutal tactics underscore the regime's role in perpetuating cultural trauma (Hasrat, 2012).

Social fragmentation resulting from trauma is evident throughout the narrative. Trust between individuals is fragile; strangers are often viewed with suspicion. This breakdown of social cohesion is a hallmark of societies undergoing cultural trauma (Bar-On, 2012). Parvana's group's cautious interactions with others reflect the challenges of rebuilding social bonds in such contexts.

Environmental factors compound trauma. The harsh Afghan winter poses physical threats, increasing vulnerability. Parvana's group struggles to find shelter and warmth, symbolizing the relentless pressure on those affected by war. These conditions intensify the physical and emotional burdens of trauma (Augstina & Ramalia, 2017).

The novel ends on a note of cautious hope with Parvana's reunion with her mother at a refugee camp. This moment symbolizes the possibility of healing and reconnection after trauma (Alexander et al., 2004). It suggests that resilience and recovery remain possible even after profound loss.

Parvana's Journey thus offers a nuanced portrayal of cultural trauma's effects on identity, gender, social relations, and survival. Parvana's story embodies Afghan society's trauma under Taliban rule characterized by loss, fear, resilience, and resistance.

Conclusion

Parvana's Journey offers a compelling and nuanced depiction of cultural trauma and its profound impact on identity, gender, and social relations in conflict-ridden Afghanistan. Through Parvana's story, Deborah Ellis illuminates the experiences of those who suffer under oppressive regimes, highlighting the intersection of personal loss and collective trauma.

Parvana's forced transformation into a boy symbolizes the broader cultural and gendered disruptions wrought by war and patriarchal oppression. Her journey reflects the resilience and adaptability required to survive in an environment that seeks to erase female agency. This transformation challenges rigid social structures and underscores the possibility of resistance within trauma.

The novel's portrayal of trauma is multifaceted, encompassing physical hardship, psychological fear, social fragmentation, and identity conflict. Parvana's persistent fear, loneliness, and struggle to maintain her true self amid disguise illustrate trauma's complex psychological dimensions. The narrative also reveals the material conditions that exacerbate trauma, such as hunger, violence, and displacement.

Despite these challenges, Parvana exemplifies human resilience. Her leadership, compassion, and courage provide a powerful counter-narrative to victimhood. These qualities affirm the capacity for growth and hope even in the most adverse circumstances.

Applying Cultural Trauma Theory enhances understanding of how trauma operates on both individual and societal levels. It reveals how collective memory and identity are shaped by shared suffering and how cultural products like literature contribute to this process. Parvana's story becomes a vehicle for bearing witness to Afghan cultural trauma and advocating for recognition and healing.

The novel's emphasis on gender highlights how trauma is not gender-neutral. Women and girls face distinct forms of oppression and violence that compound their trauma.

Parvana's narrative critiques patriarchal violence and advocates for the visibility and empowerment of marginalized voices.

In conclusion, *Parvana's Journey* is an important cultural text that offers insight into the lived realities of Afghan women and children under Taliban rule. It contributes to broader discussions on trauma, gender, and cultural survival, affirming literature's role in documenting suffering and inspiring resilience.

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