

Trauma, Memory, and Haunting: A Trauma-Theoretical Reading of *The Night of the Restless Spirits*

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Abstract

This paper offers a trauma-theoretical reading of *The Night of Restless Spirits* by Sarbpreet Singh, foregrounding the psychological aftermath of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence. Moving beyond historical documentation, the study examines how the text represents trauma as a delayed, fragmented, and recurring experience, drawing on the theoretical insights of Cathy Caruth and Sigmund Freud. The narratives reveal how survivors negotiate memory, silence, and haunting, where the past returns through intrusive recollections and narrative disruption. The metaphor of “restless spirits” symbolizes unresolved grief and collective suffering, transforming individual pain into a shared cultural memory. By analyzing themes of belatedness, repetition, and testimony, the paper argues that the text structurally enacts trauma while emphasizing its intergenerational transmission. Ultimately, the work highlights literature’s role in bearing witness to violence and resisting historical erasure.

Keywords: Trauma theory; anti-Sikh riots; collective memory; narrative fragmentation; haunting; testimony

Sarbpreet Singh’s *The Night of Restless Spirits* echoes the pain and trauma of victims of communal violence generated by maliciously engineered sentiments in the power rooms of politics. A trauma-theoretical reading of the series of short stories does not merely reveal the ghastly violence that shook Sikh community in 1984, rather, these stories present the psychological wounds and scars which became a permanent and painful memory for the survivors. Written with deep emotional and psychological insights, the book remains true to the historical praxis as well. It does not merely document the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, it presents, on a wide canvas, the psychological afterlife of violence through fragmented memory, haunting, and narrative disruption.

The word ‘trauma’ is taken from the Greek word “*titrōskein*” which means ‘wound’. In its initial usage, the word ‘trauma’ referred only to the physical injuries, but with time, it expanded to encompass the psychological wounds and pain too. In our times, when the world has witnessed too many conflicts and clashes, both the word ‘trauma’ and ‘trauma theory’ hold a major significance. British historian Dan Stone is of the view that, "Trauma studies has become something of an interdisciplinary subject in its own right, partly because of the contributions of Cathy Caruth (Glaser 29).

Before taking a plunge into the insights given by Cathy Caruth, it is pertinent to understand what exactly shapes the psychological contours of trauma. The Oxford English Dictionary defines trauma as “a mental condition that is caused by severe shock, especially when

the harmful effects last for a long time” or “an unpleasant experience that makes you feel upset and/or anxious.” Roger Luckhurst in "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology and Trauma Theory" opines that trauma is,

Something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in our mind like an intruder or a ghost (499).

Defined simply, trauma is an individual's or community's immensely charged emotional and psychological response to a horrendous and devastating episode or experience. Cathy Caruth, in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History* (1996), defines trauma as,

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon (11).

The sensitivity level of an individual determines the impact of a traumatic experience. Many factors like fear and despair contribute towards it. 'Belatedness' is an important concept given by Caruth by which she means that the incident which causes trauma to an individual does not make an immediate impact. An individual's deeply traumatic response to a physically and psychologically violent event is postponed to a much later time, when the horrendous event is long over and has perhaps become part of dust gathering newspapers. This delayed response to trauma then manifests itself in the form of victims'/survivors' / eyewitnesses' repetitive hallucinations or nightmares. Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* says that:

It is not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event...not locatable to the original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way that it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4).

Therefore, trauma is to be understood as an injury to a person's psychological and emotional being. The pain and scars of this injury remain long after the physical wounds have healed. The healing of psyche and heart remains unaccomplished because most of the times, as in the case of 1984 survivors, the conflict remained unresolved. The closure can be achieved only through the timely delivery of justice or through communal empathy.

Sarbjit Singh through these stories introduce us to a variety of characters- both the Sikhs and Hindus. Belonging to different strata of society, they have distinct political affiliations and existential choices. Living a 'normal' life in an ordinary world, replete with its whimsical envies, aspirations, love and friendships, these characters are suddenly thrown into the throes of devastating circumstances. These situations demand informed responses from some of them while other are caught in the whirlpool of prejudice, deception and violence. Seen from the angle of Trauma theory, we assess that trauma which is an outcome of objective events elicits subjective responses from different individuals. The anti-Sikh riots of 1984 were a communal tragedy but the reactions against or towards it have always been myriad. Jon Allen in *Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self Understanding* (2005) explains that,

...a traumatic experience has two components in it: the objective and the subjective.

It is the subjective experience of the objective events that constitutes the trauma...The more you believe you are endangered, the more traumatized you will

be... Psychologically, the bottom line of trauma is overwhelming emotion and a feeling of utter helplessness. There may or may not be bodily injury, but psychological trauma is coupled with physiological upheaval that plays a leading role in the long-range effects (14).

In essence, Allen emphasizes that trauma arises less from the events themselves than from how they are personally experienced—when overwhelming emotion and helplessness accompany a sense of threat, the result is lasting psychological and physiological impact.

This trauma gets enacted thematically as well as structurally in these stories. The concepts that lie at the foundation of trauma theory are belatedness, inexpressibility, repetition, and testimony. And the eight short stories bring to fore these key elements while grounding them in lived historical experiences of its characters; the characters who are chosen from diverse backgrounds, age groups, genders and social standing.

The fragmented narrative form of the book embodies trauma's resistance to coherent representation. Survivor testimonies—such as those recounting men being dragged from their homes, families hiding in terror, or entire neighborhoods engulfed in violence—are presented in disjointed, episodic fragments. These accounts often lack full closure, ending abruptly or shifting perspective, thereby enacting what Dori Laub describes as the failure of language: “there are never enough words... to articulate the traumatic experience” (76). In one particularly striking moment, a witness struggles to describe the violence, falling into pauses and partial recollections—an instance where silence speaks as powerfully as speech.

The persistence of trauma is also evident through repetition and behavioral echoes, aligning with Sigmund Freud's insight that the traumatised subject “acts out” rather than simply remembers. In the stories, survivors continue to exhibit deep-seated fear, mistrust, and emotional withdrawal, even decades later. For example, certain characters remain haunted by the sound of mobs or the memory of fire, reacting instinctively to reminders of violence. These are not deliberate recollections but involuntary returns of the past—demonstrating how trauma embeds itself within the psyche and resurfaces through repetition.

Perhaps the most powerful dimension of the book is its use of haunting, encapsulated in the metaphor of “restless spirits.” These spirits symbolize the unresolved deaths and silenced voices of the victims. The narrative repeatedly suggests that the dead have not been granted peace—not merely in a spiritual sense, but in a moral and historical one. In evocative passages, the city itself seems burdened by memory, as if “the air still held echoes of those cries.” This aligns with Caruth's idea that trauma returns to “haunt the survivor later on.” The spirits thus function as embodiments of unassimilated history, transforming psychological trauma into a shared cultural haunting.

Freudain concept of trauma as presented in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* form the foundation of Caruth's trauma theory. She considers these books as quintessential to understand human survival in the context of trauma. It is to be understood that trauma causing episode eludes full comprehension in the first go as the bearer of it fails to comprehend the gravity and reason of violence in the first place or first exposure. Long after the incident, these traumatic memories begin to haunt in the form of nightmares or hallucinations which do not find an easy articulation. The trauma exemplified through the imaginative recreation of the horrors of riots concurs with Caruth when she says that, “What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known” (6).

Caruth places huge value on the literary and imaginative representation of the traumatic events and episodes. Her inclination towards literary representation stems from the belief that the imaginative recreation of real historical events helps one understand and grasp the ramifications of trauma upon an individual and community. She contends that the survivor of a traumatic event deals with a frightening insecurity about the safety and well-being of oneself and the loved ones. Life of such individuals enter a zone of psychic and emotional complexity which slithers their life beyond normalcy. Caruth states that “I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). Many individuals who experience trauma remain silent about their suffering, sometimes indefinitely, or delay sharing it for years. This reluctance is often driven by shame, fear of judgment or blame, and the stigma attached to being seen as a “victim.” When violence is ongoing and persistent, its impact becomes deeply embedded in a person’s psyche, leaving enduring psychological effects. In this regard, Shaili Jain says in *The Unspeakable Mind: Stories of Trauma and Healing from the Frontlines of PTSD Science*,

Trauma often represents the violation of all we hold to be dear and sacred. Such events are simply too terrible to utter aloud and hence they become unspeakable... Sometimes the survivor wishes to speak, but the wider community is unwilling or unable to bear witness to their story, so the survivor is forced into silence (106).

Despite their silence at times, many trauma survivors feel a compelling need to share their painful experiences. Speaking about what they have endured often becomes a crucial step in coping and moving forward. Yet, the past does not easily fade; distressing memories frequently return as intrusive flashbacks and recurring nightmares. As a result, survivors are often driven to revisit and recount their suffering in an effort to process it.

When the ordinary flow of life is disrupted by profound or unsettling events, it can give rise to powerful creative expression. Writers, in particular, turn to literature as a means of channeling intense emotions born from such experiences. Through their work, they often become voices for their communities, articulating collective trauma and bringing attention to the suffering endured by others.

In an interview with *The Hindu*, Sarbpreet Singh talked about how writing of this book had a cathartic impact upon him. With the imaginative recreation of the pain and trauma of riot victims, he hopes that the book "mitigates the numbness that society has against minorities; that the voices of the stifled and subdued are given a just hearing, that we learn from the past and such horrors are not repeated."

The book takes collective trauma into its ambit. It encompasses the whole Sikh community, thereby extending the dimensions of individual experiences. Through multiple testimonies—stories of burnt homes, lynchings, and loss—the narrative constructs a collective archive of pain. These stories accumulate to reveal not isolated incidents but a systematic rupture of trust and belonging. Individual memories merge into a broader communal consciousness. The trauma becomes intergenerational, shaping not only those who directly experienced the riots but also those who inherit their stories and silences.

Silence plays a crucial role in the stories. Many survivors hesitate to speak, either because the memories are too painful or because they feel their suffering has been ignored. This reflects both psychological repression and socio-political marginalization. Yet, the act of narration itself becomes a form of resistance. The writer, however, transforms fragmented memories into acts of

testimony. For instance, when survivors recount specific incidents—however incomplete—they challenge the erasure of their experiences and assert the necessity of remembrance.

At the same time, the text gestures toward the possibility of working through trauma, though it resists offering closure. The persistence of haunting imagery and unresolved grief suggests that trauma cannot be fully resolved; it can only be engaged with, revisited, and partially articulated.

The Night of the Restless Spirits thus emerges as a profoundly trauma-conscious text that not only represents but structurally enacts the enduring impact of violence. Through its fragmented storytelling, its evocative imagery of haunting, and its emphasis on silence and testimony, the novel aligns closely with the theoretical framework of Cathy Caruth. Ultimately, the novel asserts that trauma is not a closed historical chapter but a restless, living presence—one that continues to shape memory, identity, and collective consciousness, demanding both recognition and ethical engagement.

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