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What Went Wrong? A Critique on Pakistan's War on Terror

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Abstract

*This paper explores the collective loss experienced by a family and a community of 'Mir Ali' in Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013). By using Butler, 2003 and Moglen, 2005 theories of loss (personal and social), personal and collective mourning, and melancholia, the study reveals how people of Pakistan's backward tribal area, Mir Ali, have suffered the trauma, loss, mourning and melancholy on personal and collective level during the 'War on Terror' by being alienated from their country. A detailed study of characters (Aman, Sammara, Mina, Hayat, and Sikandar) emphasizes how undermining it is to persons and families when they are tossed into rings of fire that expand and cause not only individual loss but irreparable communal or collective loss.*

Keywords: Collective Loss, Personal Loss, Mourning, Trauma

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What Went Wrong? A Critique on Pakistan's War on Terror

Abstract

This paper explores the collective loss experienced by a family and a community of 'Mir Ali' in Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013). By using Butler, 2003 and Moglen, 2005 theories of loss (personal and social), personal and collective mourning, and melancholia, the study reveals how people of Pakistan's backward tribal area, Mir Ali, have suffered the trauma, loss, mourning and melancholy on personal and collective level during the 'War on Terror' by being alienated from their country. A detailed study of characters (Aman, Sammara, Mina, Hayat, and Sikandar) emphasizes how undermining it is to persons and families when they are tossed into rings of fire that expand and cause not only individual loss but irreparable communal or collective loss.

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Introduction:

Literature Review

The novel under discussion explores Pakistan's 'war on terror' and analyzes the shocking and overwhelming repercussions the young generation has experienced ruined by permeating extremism in the backdrop of political violence and treachery. The novel's setting is Mir Ali, a Waziristan town bordering Afghanistan. It narrates the life and sufferings of three Pashtun brothers and two of their wives who are chained by their traditions as well as severely affected by a rebellion. These characters are forced to make complex decisions during their life. Hence the current study reveals the brunt of the 'war on terror,' which includes drone strikes and mass murders for no reason, in Waziristan and shows how external pressures from Western superpowers and

Islamic jihadists alike come to a head in a single day. The young protagonists of this novel represent the sacrifices and the forced choices one must make to fight power, especially when one is not left with many options. The younger generation of Waziristan has doubts about their state's working and they question the state's procedures to know what went wrong in their country and why. Bhutto draws consideration to represent facts in her motherland by presenting how the disintegration of the public assortment damages one ordinary family in Pakistan. The author categorically delineates the loss of those people by describing a kind of quagmire of injustice that was swallowing up them whole (SCM 47).

There have been a number of studies and critiques on different aspects of the novel under



discussion. Some of these recent studies are discussed here. The shade that the moon casts on the village reaches far off, signifying the aches, miseries, and traumas of the characters due to the War on Terror. Bhutto shows the intricacy of human life and relationships. Moreover, she emphasizes the psychological problems of the major characters. (Zainab et al. (2020) The study further analyses the novel's depiction of war and the resulting pain and loss.

Moreover, Shah and Asif (2014) also depicted almost the same kind of predicament of people in Waziristan and the impacts of the Pakistani Taliban's attacks on the army-administered school. Farhan et al. 2023, write in their analysis of the novel about the repression and resistance by major characters against the state apparatuses. The critics also highlighted some very distressing facts and scenarios regarding the social and political life in the region of Mir Ali. The writers have opposed the political narrative that the state has established about these people and regions and want people's voices to be heard.

However, Zaidi et al. (2022) reveal the subverted gender roles in their article by discussing the female characters' strength and courage. This aspect is missing in many men in the novel, hence destabilizing the stereotypical gender norms from the Pakistani perspective. The article further analyzes the characters from a feminist perspective. Similarly, (Asl & Hanafiah, 2024) study the intersecting factors in the novel, contributing to violence against women in Pakistan, particularly those who belong to the Tribal Areas.

All these studies reveal one or the other aspects of the novel, whereas the current study represents the loss and trauma experienced by the major characters because of the war on terror.

Research Objectives

The study aims to meet these objectives:

1. To explore the collective and personal loss experienced by the community of Mir Ali as given in Bhutto's novel (2013).
2. Represent Butler and Moglen, 2007 theories of loss (personal and social), melancholia, trauma, and loss through the major characters' sufferings in Bhutto's novel (2013).

Research Questions

1. How is the collective and personal loss of the community in Mir Ali represented by Bhutto (2013) in her novel?
2. How are Butler and Moglen's theories of loss reflected in personal and social loss experienced by the local community in the novel under discussion?

Text Analysis

The timeline of the novel is three and a half hours only. The chapters are titled 9.00, 9.25, and 9.53, and so on until Noon (with intervals into the history of every character) and a day before Eid-ul-Fitr. The bazaar is about to open, rain is about to pour down and thick fog covers the rooftops as the three brothers — Aman Erum (an expatriate, lately returned from America), Hayat (a student at Mir Ali's university, and a hot-headed rebel activist) and Sikandar (a doctor at the local hospital) — have come together in the kitchen to have breakfast at their parents' place. Sikandar and Mina have lost their son in violent bomb assaults by the Taliban. Aman Erum and Samarra's relationship is ended. And Hayat, the youngest joins the rebellious movement to follow in the footsteps of his father Innayat.

According to Judith Butler, 2003 when we lose our loved ones or when we are displaced from our beloved places/ homelands we have a feeling that it is a temporary loss, that mourning will end, and everything will go back to the previous orderly way of life. But undergoing a loss reveals who we really are and what bonds we share with others that connect us to them and compose us, she says; "I" does not exist independently here, and does not simply lose a "you" there, particularly when "you" is a part of who "I" am. "I" is nothing without "you." When the ties are lost, the individual identity is also lost, the ties are what constitute "I." If one loses "you," one is also lost. (Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence 124)

The people of Mir Ali are undergoing a similar condition. The families are separating, these people cannot conduct their daily lives anymore as they used to because suddenly suicide bombing, violence, and terrorism have become an everyday calculation. All the families in Mir Ali have suffered losses for their loved ones and these personal losses connect them with each other and

reveal the ties and bonds that they share with each other. As the novel opens, the three brothers have already decided to go to different mosques to offer Eid prayers because conditions were not favorable and danger was looming large so risks must be avoided. Now they couldn't perform any activities together, neither prayers nor travel or dining out (SCM 37). Hayat goes to the city on a motorbike, however, Aman Erum (the eldest brother), prefers to take a taxi to the neighboring mosque whereas Sikandar decides to drive to the hospital. Sikandar's wife Mina frequently attends the funerals of unknown people in the town. Hence there is a probing sense of sadness that is overwhelming in the three protagonists. Their story further reveals the relations they had in the past, the disturbing present, oscillating smoothly between their past and near future having an ambiguity that continues until the end.

In the novel, unfaithfulness, loyalty, relations, ties, and pliability confront each other with love, tolerance, development, and changing ideologies. All the brothers in their lives have made tough decisions and choices in life since the demise of their father, Inayat, who had cautioned Hayat, his youngest son, that their choices would have consequences. He belonged to the older generation of Mir Ali, men who had been fighting for years against the treacheries of the state and along with his other members of the town had sought independence from Pakistan and its extreme injustices in the 1950s. He had advised Hayat that soon every family member would admit that pain becomes meaningless when they struggle for a collective cause. (SCM 139).

Butler, 1997 says in *The Psychic Life of Power*, that the crucial difference between mourning and melancholia is that mourning is the open declaration of loss or death, whereas in melancholia the loss is unacknowledged. It is this aspect of melancholia, the unacknowledged loss that provides the possibility of extending this theory to the collective social group. Hence, we see how social forces are responsible for the loss of groups of people. In the novel, all the major characters have made their personal choices for their lives and in one way or another, have suffered losses; but together as a community or a social group, the citizens of Mir Ali have lost their freedom and unity. The culture and religion are deeply rooted in Mir Ali and its hilly

surroundings, and life conditions are very hard, and spying and surveillance of the area are very stern (SCM 21).

Pakistan's war on terror is a multifaceted incident. If we call it a coercive event, it will not be wrong. Everything changed after the pre-planned event of 9/11 when the Bush government just after one month initiated the war on terror against extremism and fundamentalist jihadis giving it the name of "Endorsing Freedom". They decided to invade Afghanistan and Pakistan was forced to offer its strategic help to the US. The decline would have resulted in serious damages otherwise as for the open declaration of the Bush administration that "whether you are with us or with the terrorists." The primary motives of the Pakistani government were to fight against non-state terror and violence, to demolish Al-Qaida and to portray a neutral or moderate image of Pakistan for the rest of the world. Though Pakistan stands as a major ally in this war today and has gained much sadly this war on terror has adversely affected our own compatriots and tribal border areas like Mir Ali. The state declared its own pieces of land as terrorist' areas and conducted military operations against them. Over the years, groups of people have lived and suffered collective losses like the people of Mir Ali. It is an unruly region known to Americans and Pakistanis for providing shelter to the extremist groups of jihadis. Bhutto explores the notion that the people of Mir Ali were motivated more by a quest for independence than by radical Islam. In reality, they never fully embraced their country. A sentiment prevailed among common Pakistanis that the people of Mir Ali were kind traitors who were living in Pakistan but had no respect for their land or flag and wanted to chip off Pakistan in a futile hope of having an independent state.

Bhutto asserts in her interview with NPR that this part of the country has always been removed and the people of this region have suffered over the past fifteen years due to the war on terror. She says that drones and military attacks have been focused here. The people who belong here do not have the liberty to live freely as per their wishes because they "have become the epicenter of something dangerous." Hence regions like Mir Ali are doubly marginalized as these people are not only fighting against terrorism and fundamentalism but also suffering through their own state policies and

external pressures. Understanding and coming to terms with loss is never easy. Many times people come across a loved one's loss (like Mina and Sikandar's son). At other times people come across the death or the end of a relationship (in the case of Aman and Sammara). Collective Loss is one that is more difficult to understand, acknowledge, and work through. People must sacrifice as groups and suffer losses, sometimes of their loved ones, their kinfolks, their lands, their traditions, their freedom, or their identity. Pakistan, according to Bhutto is a country that demands sacrifices from its people. It has been under violent attacks of terrorism and Pakistanis have been sacrificing; their loved ones, their freedom, and their own selves to varying degrees. Many are marginalized, living impoverished lives due to history's events. Bhutto says in her interview that it is very unfortunate that violence and extremism are becoming normal day by day. If you happen to visit Baluchistan's tribal areas, you will see the terror. It is a sad fact that violence is rampant in Pakistan and one has to cope with it somehow wherever they live (NPR). Thus, it confirms Seth Moglen's concept of "the social forces responsible for the collective loss." Due to the interference and violence of social and external forces, citizens of Pakistan have suffered individual losses, and these personal tragedies have transformed them into a shared "We" rather than an individual "I."

In his essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (2005), Sigmund Freud discusses two responses to the loss of a beloved object. Mourning is described as the common response of human beings to actual loss, the death of the object. The behavioral traits of mourning mirror those of melancholia. Mourners endure a profound sense of anguish, a diminished interest in the external world except when it evokes memories of the deceased, an inability to focus on new objects of interest as replacements for what has been lost, and a tendency to avoid any tasks unrelated to recalling the departed. This is seen in Sikandar's wife, Mina's character. Once a lecturer in Psychology and a woman full of life, she has lost interest in life and no more takes part in the family gatherings or gossips. The only interest she has in life is to attend the funerals of other such kids who lost their lives in terrorist attacks. Mina's volatile temperament is the result of her son's death in a Taliban assault and whenever she sees his "Bubble

Gummer" sneakers, she realizes that her son is under the earth and it would tear her soul apart. She had left her teaching job and would devote her time and energy to sharing with other bereaved mothers' loss. (SCM 74).

According to Freud, 2005 even if the mourner may try to hold on to the lost object for a period, he or she understands that the object no longer exists and after a period of mourning work, is able to return to life as it was before. In Mina's case, however, though she returns to life, it is never as it was before the loss of her kid. In this capacity, she is the heart and soul of the entire book, nevertheless, the determination of body and the strength of mind exists in a society where women's opinions matter not. Mina, rocket in her head, understands what troubles she and her family run into with the Shia sect and their fight against the Taliban in Mir Ali. With her husband Sikandar, who is in his hospital van, she sees the Taliban fighters in thin beards and light blue turbans. At that moment, Mina shows guts and vigor to stand up to them. She calls them "Zaalim!" In an outbreak so full of rage and pain that it shocks the Talib commander, she blames them for bias. Her husband trembles, afraid of his wife's audacity. Mina outrageously spoke to the commander which made her husband tremble with fear. According to the novelist, these men were students of justice and they could be violent or rash in their attitudes but they were not unjust as they had fighting against injustice. Mina makes sure that she makes a point about their injustices and unlawful killings. She screams at the peak of her voice so much so that her voice is hoarse. All of this unfolds before Sikandar as he endures brutal beatings and at gunpoint, he is forced to respond to a life-or-death question if he belong to the Shiite community or Sunni? Hence she confirms Freud's revised reading that the suffering of the melancholic does not come to the same healthy conclusion. Her type of loss reflects the loss of every second or third mother of Mir Ali. This is what these helpless mothers go through and are unable to save their children from the Drone attacks and their own state's militancy against them. Thus, Mina in her personal grief and loss reflects another collective loss.

David Eng also argues that melancholia is a theory of unresolved grief. This is reflected in Aman Erum's character very well. In the novel, Aman Erum

is an expatriate who wants to establish his business in America in exchange for passing valuable information on the rebels to the state. He has now come back to his town after living a few years in America whereas a young man, he had hopes of making a good future, and he left behind Samara (his childhood friend and beloved) and his own young brothers. He again portrays a shared and collective identity by showing many like him who have an American Dream in their eyes and want to come true to it. In the past, young Aman Erum entered the American Embassy in Islamabad nervously in his "bespoke polyester suit" to apply for his visa. He wanted to look sober in a suit. He had already prepared answers to questions regarding 9/11 and the Twin Tower attack. He would only say in response that two airplanes had struck the high buildings and that heroes were piloting the airplanes. He realizes at that moment that his host country is not looking for the answers that he had calculated years ago. He decides to become a state informer years later. In doing so he loses his idealist notions and realizes that it was the great price he had to pay for getting a visa for the US.

While he leaves for the mosque, all the memories of his childhood bond with Samarra and his father's bravery come back to his mind, we understand this novel's importance for its enormous thematic inquiries. The political and foreign policies of Pakistan are brutally destroying the unstable region and its people (young women and men). Aman's youngest brother Hayat resides in Mir Ali and carries on the anti-state activism of their departed father for example buying and smuggling weapons, and heavy artillery, right under the nose of the military (SCM 178). He works with radical students and professors again, reflecting collective hatred for the state and foreign rule. He makes a relationship with Samarra who is a firebrand like him. She takes part in all the activities of his rebellion like assassinating the visiting chief minister and claims that their action will prove a huge assault that will transform the whole scenario compelling them to reconfigure everything. (SCM 296). For her rebellious attitudes and activities, Samarra is picked up, cross-examined, tormented, and scared by the authorities. Bhutto shows that years of unjust rule forced disappearances of locals, and violence towards the local people by their own state have changed the mindset of young generations with no hopeful future. According to

Butler, 2004, the State suspends the law or uses it as an instrument to serve, constrain, and monitor its subjects. The state itself, however, is not bound by that law. The state adapts the rule of law to suit its needs, concentrating more power within its own executive and administrative branches. Even when any rule of the state is suspended or flouted, it is done to safeguard the state's sovereignty. (67)

Accordingly, Fatima Bhutto criticizes the Pakistani government's policies of law enforcement and its treatment of the young population of the tribal region. This is the generation who has suffered by being forced into the war beyond their understanding. It is their shared concept of "We" who have been suffering collectively. Samarra accurately confronts the officer who abuses her during her detention for being a rebel and conspirator; she sows them the mirror by retorting that they (the army) are the traders of their motherland but claim to be its defenders. (SCM 312). This links to Butler's concept of the social aspect of melancholia and supports my arguments for extending personal grief and loss to the social or collective. According to Butler, 2004 by observing Freud's inclusion of loss from "slights and disappointments" and stating that by including the loss of high ideals like country or liberty, he makes it clear that a melancholic response can also be a response to social losses.

Thus, the fictional town of Mir Ali becomes a microcosm not only of the KP region but also of the whole country of Pakistan where the citizens are physically insecure, politically uncertain, and economically weak, where they cannot make decisions on their own and choices are hard to come by. Hence it becomes suffocating for everyone. This is the collective experience of the Pakistani youth. They are uncertain about their future, and they are not even allowed to fight against the external powers who are usurping their rights to life and freedom. Inayat, the father of the three brothers had predicted the fate of his people and the surging violence in his country. "The state would begin to fight its own." (86)

The freedom of the nation is bartered for the comfort of the very few. The generation's dreams and freedom do not mean anything to the state. Those who refuse this exchange must bear adverse effects. They carry wounds inflicted on them by their own state. Hence there are those protagonists who

saw that it is not worth dying for freedom, and those who felt that it is not worth living without it. Towards the end of the novel, Hayat warns a rebel that this fight would take up his life so if he is ready for that or not? And the rebel replies what kind of life he inquires about? This shows the disappointment of the young people of Mir Ali. As Butler says in *Undoing Gender*, "What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some."

Conclusion

Hence in the words of the author herself, the shadow of the crescent moon refers to the flag of Pakistan that also flutters over this northwestern region of the country. She tells NPR's Steve Inskeep, that the

people and soil of this part of Pakistan have always felt alienated, neglected, and detached from the center. They could not benefit from the brilliant light of the moon but stayed under the dark shadow of the crescent moon of the Pakistani flag and could never escape it in spite of a million attempts. What "The Shadow of the Crescent Moon" profoundly captures is the collective loss experienced by the younger generation of our country, the trauma that they have suffered in the war their own dreams being shattered, and the fact that they are torn as a shared "We" between the loyalties to their nation and those to their community as the people of Mir Ali are suffering losses personal and socially in a war against terrorism as well as against their own state. How incredibly challenging it is to reassemble what has been shattered, and how effortlessly it can be destroyed once more.

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