



Mapping the Landscapes of Fear: An Analysis of Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Trauma in Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*

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Abstract

The motif of terrorism does not remain restricted to perpetrate violence, rather the major goal is to instill fear in the psyche of not only immediate victim but to a wide range of audience. This psychology of threat becomes more evident in the regions where the constant conflict between the military and militant is a routine backdrop. The perpetual struggle shatters living experiences of civilians, making it difficult for them to survive in an atmosphere where surveillance and charges of complicity are constant affairs, creating a breach among family, friendship, and community. This seems relevant in the context of Kashmir where the abovementioned situations have seeped into the framework of life as the residents undergo a routine threat by both terrorists and state forces. The pervasive atmosphere of threat and anxiety as well as violence becomes internalized and the ordinary civilians feel entrapped with no authority over their landscapes, lives, and identity. *The Collaborator* (2011) by Mirza Waheed, mirrors this landscape of fear and trauma by focusing on the functions of both insurgent groups and security forces. Through the portrayal of the protagonist's reluctant job under military, the novel highlights the lack of autonomy and ethical dilemma of civilians residing in the zone of crossfire. By using the theoretical framework of trauma and postcolonial viewpoints, the paper illustrates how terror and trauma reconstruct identity, space, and morality. Further, how the acts of state forces blur the line between victims and perpetrators, challenging the idea of terrorism typically being a non-state violence.

Keywords: Fear, Identity, Landscape, Trauma, and Terrorism

I. Introduction

Terrorism is often portrayed as a shocking event or spectacle of violence having immediate

repercussions, overlooking the everyday experiences of torture and torment of those who live in zones of conflict. Kashmiri writers like Agha Shahid Ali, Basharat Peer, Rahul Pandita, Siddhartha Gigoo, and Shahnaz Bashir have initiated to capture this issue significantly in their works. But, Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* (2011) uniquely demonstrates fear as a perpetual drive in the valley of Kashmir by exposing reality of the militarized zone. Divided in three parts "Now and Then", "Then", "Now," the novel is set amidst the backdrop of insurgency and depicts the living conditions of civilians through the mouthpiece of an unnamed protagonist, who lives in a village near LOC (Line of Control), and is forced to collect identity cards of dead militants for the military purpose. The text asserts terrorism as a systemic violence that seeps into space, psyche, and communal bonds. Through its psychological, topographical, sociological, and political investigation of fear, the text describes terrorism as a persistent form of control and violence, highlighting the conflicts between terrorists and military whose lasting impacts reflect the underlying tolls of conflict.

The transformation of land itself marks the cruelty inflicted on it as Kashmir has always been renowned for its scenic beauty and natural vistas. The novel delineates its rapid conversion from "mossy docile-looking hills and a long ridge" which is having "scores of shades during the day" (4) to a "ghostly graveyard" (299) where the dead bodies of alleged militants are strewn, stinking like a "putrid trench" (13). The natural spaces which are earlier associated with scenic landscapes have become a site of death, decay, and surveillance. The unnamed protagonist's regular visit to the "corpse land" (13) represents land itself as a repository of violence. The desecrated state of motherland has been highlighted by Ashfaq, a resident as: "They are making this a jahannum... Look, look, look how they have killed that mountain... that forest they have just scorched"



(46). This showcases how a piece of land embodies “memories, feelings, and meaning” (Balaev 160) which are close to the heart of its residents. Before militarization, the valley is mentioned as “beautiful” where, “no one bothered..., probably no one even noticed. It was like our own private patch; during summer vacations we would play cricket and fool around all day in this secluded playground of ours” (4). This topological change of civilian spaces into a site of military terrain has been observed in “topo-analysis” (McClintock 11) by Scott McClintock, who highlights how an “island of Guantánamo” has been converted into a “prison island” where “America has been detaining individuals swept up in the dragnet of its war on terror” (McClintock 7). Likewise, the narrator describes the ubiquitous presence of military in the hidden forests, “This path to the valley...runs parallel...to the boundary of the army camp in the woods on the left. The machine gun pickets are scattered...close to the ridge” (45). Further, there are episodes of patrolling, crackdowns, and fake encounters through which state produces terror. Captain Kadian, a military officer, symbolizes institutional regime who exercises power through covert control in place of explicit atrocity but his statement often normalizes violence as a routine phenomenon. On the context of filming “foreign militants”, he states: “how the fuck do they know I am not lying? I can fucking make any maderchod look like an Afghan. The dead don’t speak...” (9). This statement is specimen of fake encounters and atrocities of army members. Ashis Nandy call state violence as: the human instruments of violence and oppression...their brutalization is planned and institutionalized (Nandy 4). This can be evidently noticed in the acts of detentions as the “Black Cats” sudden raid on Farooq’s house brings out their quick actions and strategic coordination. As they “parked their vehicles”; “rushed in quickly”; “tearing the main door off its hinges”, and arrested him “with coils of rope tied around his neck and arms” (184). Farooq who is Gul’s brother (an alleged militant) is dragged by them and tortured to death in order to gain information which he never had as Gul disappeared without mentioning a thing. The text illustrates:

He was made to pee on an electric heater while they threw ice-cold water over him; they pierced a red-hot knitting needle through his penis and then gave him electric shocks; they stuffed a bamboo cane with hot chilli powder and thrust it up his anus and then broke the cane; they made him drink their collective urine after keeping him thirsty for days; they ran a

cricket roller over his feet and knees; no, they let loose their big dogs on him and that was the point when he broke, for he had always been scared of dogs...(186)

Eventually, Farooq was “bloated, headless body” (196) found near the rivulet. This foregrounds that the war on terror often rely on violent measures. In Putting *Terrorism in Context*, the authors state that: “the commonly held belief that the only effective response of governments to terrorism is to use repressive measures...” (LaFree, Dugan and Miller 232) which further degenerate the psyche of both the victim and oppressor. Nandy argues that:

continuous suffering inflicted by fellow human beings...deprivation of human dignity...long experience of authoritarian political rule..., these distort the cultures and minds, especially the values and the self-concepts, of the sufferers and those involved in the manufacturing of suffering (Nandy 26).

In a discussion with the narrator, captain Kadian emphasizes the obligations of his duty where the actions taken by him are not his personal will but the nature of his job for which he has been assigned there. He reveals in front of narrator that: “You think I like this? You think we kill them for sport, isn’t it? You think we do this just like that, for no reason” (277) which reflects the complexity of his position. Hannah Ardent critiques that “legitimate politics necessarily takes the shape of a command-obedience relationship between ruler and people, enforced through violence or the fear of violence” (qtd. in Ashcroft 2).

The threat of militantism in the text is also significant which forced civilians in a perpetual threat. Civilians face a continuous torture either by army or by militants. There is an incident mentioned in the text where militants chopped the tongue of Rahman Khatana’s mother. Rahman traumatically states, “they manhandled my mother and pushed father into a corner, and there they interrogated him for the next three to four hours...asking him...why he helped the army bastards” (207). It reflects how violence gradually enters the “weave of life” (Das 88). The sloganeering seems the most common tactics used by militants to state unrest. It is noted in the text: “La Ilah-a-Ilallah! Superpower hai Khuda! Jaago, Jaago, Subah ho gayi! Indian dogs, go back! What do we want? Freedom. What do we want? Freedom!” (176). This distorted sense of religious verses indicates that terrorists have “divine mandates” (Borum 46). Nasra Hasan in her study on the nature of Palestinian terrorists assert that they



have conviction that their tasks are “sanctioned by the divinely revealed religion of Islam” (qtd. in Borum 46) and on this framework violence becomes their moral duty.

The text also reflects traumatic childhood which is getting stifled into the sound of bombs and grenades instead of innocence and laughter. The parades, enchantment of provoking slogans, showcasing rifles, and killings of militants are imitated by children characterizes the banality of violence in conflicted zones, creating an ambience of “anxiety in social life” (qtd. in McClintock 11). As the text highlights:

mock parade organized by children...carrying sticks and disused planks of weathered wood, with strings tied at one end for slinging on shoulders, was immediately disrupted by their fathers...” (78).

The pervasive state of fear shatters the identity as well as communal bonds which mirrors in the reluctant task of the protagonist who implicitly hated Captain Kadian for torturing his people and polluting his land with dead bodies but still has no choice to disobey him. The narrator’s constant encounter with deceased captures the horror of the situation:

Bodies after bodies - some huddled together, others forlorn and lonesome — in various stages of decay. Wretched human remains lie on the green grass like cracked toys. Teeth, shoes. For God knows how long I just cannot remove my eyes from this landscape, heaps of them, big and small, body parts, belongings littered amidst the rubble of legs and arms. . . . Macabre, horrid ghouls(8)

The imagery of dehumanized bodies repetitively troubles the narrator’s psyche. His traumatic condition can be witnessed through his delusions. Sometimes he feels dead ones are greeting him; in one moment he gets impression that trees are talking with having a “long, considered look at me, to make up their mind, to judge me in some mysterious way...Here’s the abandoned one, the left-out one, the one who must tell the story” (80). At once he hallucinates that he is “King Ashoka” (74) while observing the bodies, lying in the valley. These incidents suggest his altered state of mind due to the painful experiences. Cathy Caruth writes that: “...extreme trauma creates a second self...as in extreme trauma, one’s sense of self is radically altered. And there is a traumatized self that is created. Of course, it’s not a totally new self, it’s what one brought into the trauma as affected

significantly and painfully” (Caruth 137). Hence, the hallucinations and delusions, blurs the boundary of real and imaginary, can be seen as traumatic symptoms of the overwhelming experiences. Waheed’s use of first-person narration intensifies this psychological mapping, compelling readers to inhabit a consciousness shaped by coercion and fear. The text highlights narrator’s dejected state as:

Slowly and steadily, I realize, I seem to have become used to everything, as if it were normal, as if it were all inevitable, as if it were my destiny; and if it goes on like this. I won’t even be able to tell whether I am mad or sane (260).

His condition resonates with what Robert Lifton calls “psychic numbing” (qtd. in Caruth 85) and Dominick LaCapra calls it as “distance between here and there, then and now, collapses” (LaCapra 89) where the protagonist loses his critical perception due to getting habituated of his task of collecting IDs from the dead bodies which are described as:

naked bodies, splayed across each other, as in those old paintings in our history textbooks, reveal everything in bare detail, in their absolute, core nakedness: white ghostly bodies, bones nudging into each other, elbows and knees, white kneecaps, red and blue and purple buttocks, sometimes with big chunks missing from them, sunken rib cages, portions of dinosaur-like spines visible under the skin, shameful somehow — they make you look away.

Seeing mutilated bodies makes the narrator both numb and deeply distressed, showing the strange paradoxical of trauma. Fear works inside as self-surveillance. The narrator censors his thoughts, hides his feelings, and pulls away from close relationships. His sense of self breaks under guilt and helplessness, showing how terrorism can destroy a person’s identity as much as it destroys lives. It has been dealt through many episodes, the most pertinent among many is Farooq’s death, which wrought villagers “in a state of perennial mourning” (197) which suggests cultural trauma where “identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity’s earlier life” (qtd. in Madigan 49). As the narrator addresses: “we too are part of it” (188), all of them are collectively suffering for the loss of their family and community members who crossed border like Ashfaq, Hussain, Gul, Muhammed or being continually killed by the state force: “young and old,



men and children, dead, all dead, dead..." (117). A similar picture of death and destruction has been drawn by Basharat Peer who in his memoir *Curfewed Nights* has written:

Because nobody knows the names of the dead, the locals who manage the graveyard have marked them with numbers...marks the grave as No21, No 23..." (Peer 157).

The threat of repeated crackdowns sucks the blood out of their bones. The desecrated state of Kashmir has been portrayed in the suffering of women. The narrator's mother has been in shock due to the discretion of her communal environment and she locks herself within the boundaries of her house; becomes silent and muted. Her stifling silence and agony can be felt when the narrator states: "Maybe that's what Ma also wants, to leave, to run away, to escape her prison of loneliness. She hasn't seen another woman for more than a year now" (112). The minimal conversation or only exchange of winks reflects the uneasiness and intense grief plunging inside her. She stands "wordless" (193) while witnessing the agony of other women which suggest the distortion of language due to unbearable pain. Elaine Scarry writes that: "From no matter what perspective pain is approached, its totality is again and again faced... Its mastery of the body... displaces all else until it seems to become the single broad and omnipresent fact of existence" (Scarry 55). The painful existence can be further witnessed in the narratives of "milk beggars" (179) who are group of women begging milk to feed children who are starving as the curfew imposed in their village there is no work; everything is shut down on military commands. Likewise, Indu Bushan Zutshi captures the outburst of a vendor, "How shall I feed my family when I am not allowed to go to work. It is curfew day today...we will die of starvation (Zutshi 3). Further, women are also subjected to physical assault by both soldiers and militants. The women are identified as mothers of disappeared sons, husbands, or fathers losing agency over their own existence. Zareen Khan states that:

In the majority of contemporary fiction about Kashmir, women are portrayed as silent victims and sufferers, who are at the other end of the whole discourse but unfortunately at the center of the agonizing pain (Khan 33).

Silence recurs throughout the novel and is central to the depiction of fear. Fear thrives in such silences. There are no rituals of mourning or public ways to acknowledge their loss. The inability to speak, mourn, or resist publicly reinforces isolation and social fragmentation. Waheed's sparse prose mirrors

this erasure, emphasizing what remains unsaid. The continuous trauma ultimately leads to the societal collapse as the villagers started fleeing in order to find a secure places. The mass exodus of villagers illustrates collective trauma as "they marched in one buzzing, breathing, sinuous line, and were trying to hurry on, lest someone stop them" (249). They are erasing the iota of their existence leaving only "curving wisp of dust behind" (252). Their forced migration reminds the exodus of Pandits from Kashmir in a similar manner as Rahul Pandita in his memoir *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* writes poignantly, "For me, though, exile is permanent. Homelessness is permanent. I am uprooted in my mind" (Pandita 224). It gives a sense that the civilians of Kashmir are suffering irrespective of their caste, class, and religion. Mirza Waheed captures the plight of Kashmiri Muslims, and Rahul Pandita brings out the tormented state of Pandits. Terrorism thus operates not only through visible violence but through the systematic denial of voice, history, and justice. This forced silence reflects how grief and memory are suppressed in areas affected by conflict. Meenakshi Bharat states that: In a world where the abnormal is fast becoming normal, where terror and trauma are the only identifiable realities...novels register an urgent need to write about this trauma, for in doing so, it is given the recognition it deserves" (Bharat 163). It is necessary to "share and translate" (Kaplan 1) the narratives of trauma as literature becomes a creative outlet through which "emotional wounds" (Davis and Meretoja 1) get transformed into words and establishes a "link between culture...in a catastrophic age" (Caruth 11).

Thus, the novel offers a vivid depiction of a world marked by terror, presenting it as a lived reality for individuals whose daily experiences are shaped by fear, trauma, and coercion. By tracing landscapes of fear across physical environments, psychological states, and political systems, the narrative challenges simplistic interpretations of terrorism as exclusively non-state violence. Waheed demonstrates how sustained militarization and the exercise of state power generate persistent terror that shapes everyday existence, undermines moral agency, and fragments personal identity. The Collaborator ultimately serves as a compelling critique of the ways in which fear operates as the most pervasive and enduring weapon in conflict. Through its intimate storytelling and unflinching representation of violence, the novel urges readers to acknowledge the often unseen yet lasting impacts of terrorism in contested regions such as Kashmir.



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