

NARRATING TRAUMA AND EMPOWERMENT: A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF “SOMEONE LIKE HER” BY AWAIS KHAN

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Abstract

*This paper will provide a critical literary and textual response to the novel *Someone Like Her* by Awais Khan in terms of its expression of the complexities of trauma and feminine empowerment in a modern Pakistani socio-cultural setting. Based on the interdisciplinary approaches, mostly Trauma theory by Cary Caruth's, recovery by Judith Herman and power theory by Michael Foucault, the study explores the narrative practices where personal and collective trauma is produced, negotiated, and transformed into a place of resistance and agency. Qualitative textual analysis is used in the study to investigate how the characters have been characterized, their narrative voice, symbolism and constructions of themes with particular emphasis on the psychological and social development of the protagonist. It challenges the manner in which traumatized as a result of gender based violence, marginalization in the society, and patriarchal oppression are not just presented as victimhood but re-defined as a source of self-realization and empowerment. The analysis also places the novel in the wider context of South Asian feminist literature, and how it contributes towards the undermining of the prevailing discourse which silences voices of women. This study hypothesizes that *Someone Like Her* redefines the empowerment concept as multifaceted, non-linear process, which is affected by both internal healing and external socio-cultural factors by foreshadowing the synthesis of both trauma and resilience. The work is a contribution to the literature field in terms of broadening the critical discourse on literature on trauma in Pakistani English fiction and the importance of literature as a transformative platform to express the marginalized identity and create a socio-cultural consciousness.*

Keywords: *Trauma, Empowerment, Caruth theory, Michael Foucault*

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence remains one of the most persistent manifestations of patriarchal power across South Asia, where women's bodies are frequently subjected to control, surveillance, and punishment in the name of honour, morality, and social order. Among the most extreme forms of such violence are acid attacks, which are designed not only to inflict physical harm but also to mark, silence, and socially erase their victims permanently. These attacks target the female body as a visible symbol of identity, beauty, and worth, transforming it into a site of punishment meant to enforce obedience and deter resistance. Mittal et al.2021 explores the psychological trauma in females. Despite legal reforms and growing public awareness, survivors of acid violence continue to face social stigma, psychological trauma, and systemic neglect, rendering their suffering largely invisible within dominant cultural narratives. Herman (2015) points out that often traumatic events surface in the form of symptoms.

In this context, literature emerges as a crucial space for articulating experiences that are otherwise silenced or marginalized. Where legal discourse often reduces survivors to statistics and media representations risk sensationalism, literary narratives offer a more nuanced engagement with trauma, memory, and subjectivity. Trauma theory suggests that experiences of extreme violence frequently resist direct articulation, manifesting instead through silence, fragmentation, and disrupted temporality. According to the American Psychological Association (2000), trauma can be defined as a first-hand experience of an event by an individual involving threatened death or serious injury to self. Psychological trauma may also include witnessing another individual being threatened or injured. Literary texts are uniquely

equipped to represent these complexities, allowing trauma to be expressed without the constraints of linear coherence or factual testimony. Through narrative experimentation and emotional depth, fiction can transform private suffering into a public act of witnessing, thereby challenging cultural silences surrounding gendered violence.

Awais Khan's *Someone Like Her* occupies a significant position within this representational space by foregrounding the lived experience of an acid attack survivor in contemporary Pakistan. The novel does not merely depict the act of violence itself but instead focuses on its prolonged aftermath—psychological disorientation, bodily alienation, and social withdrawal. By centering the narrative on the survivor's interiority, Khan resists reductive portrayals of victimhood and instead presents trauma as an ongoing condition shaped by both memory and social response. Well-known work in the field of psychological trauma can be traced back to work on hysteria by Charcot (1889) who pointed out that 'the very idea that the patient has of his accident' results in trauma. In doing so, the novel aligns with trauma theorists who argue that the effects of violence persist long after the event, continuously reshaping identity and self-perception.

Significance of study

Within the landscape of Pakistani English fiction, *Someone Like Her* represents a notable intervention. While earlier works have addressed women's oppression through themes of domestic confinement, forced marriage, or honour-related violence, acid attacks have received comparatively limited literary attention. Khan's novel expands the thematic and ethical scope of the tradition by focusing on corporeal trauma and the politics of visibility. The scarred female body becomes central to narrative meaning, challenging aesthetic norms that privilege beauty, wholeness, and idealized femininity. By insisting on the visibility of disfigurement, the novel confronts readers with the social consequences of bodily violence and compels an ethical engagement with suffering that is often socially disavowed.

Feminist body politics provides a critical framework for understanding how *Someone Like Her* constructs the female body as a contested site of power. Feminist theorists have long argued that women's bodies are culturally inscribed with meanings that regulate behaviour and reinforce gender hierarchies. In patriarchal societies, bodily violence functions as a disciplinary mechanism, transforming the body into a warning against transgression. Acid attacks, in particular, operate as symbolic acts aimed at destroying visibility and social mobility, reducing the survivor to a state of enforced invisibility. Khan's narrative exposes this logic by depicting how the protagonist's altered appearance reshapes her interactions with family, society, and herself.

Through the combined perspective of trauma theory and feminist body politics *Someone Like Her* represents acid attack trauma as both a psychological rupture and a socio-cultural inscription on the female body. By foregrounding silence, memory, and bodily disfigurement, Khan exposes the mechanisms through which patriarchal violence seeks to erase female identity, while simultaneously reclaiming the scarred body as a site of resistance and narrative self-redefinition. In doing so, *Someone Like Her* emerges as a powerful literary intervention that challenges dominant discourses of shame and invisibility surrounding survivors of gendered violence.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gendered Violence and Patriarchy in South Asia

Scholarly research highlights that gender-based violence in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, is often rooted in patriarchal social structures, restrictive gender norms, and familial control over women's autonomy. Acid attacks, as highlighted in Khan's novel, represent an extreme manifestation of patriarchal control, intended to punish women who resist societal expectations (Khan & Malik, 2021). Studies show that these attacks are both a physical and

psychological tool to enforce social conformity, disproportionately affecting women who assert independence in education, employment, and personal choice (UN Women, 2018). Khan's narrative aligns with this research by centering a female protagonist who defies patriarchal norms, thus reflecting real-life socio-cultural dynamics.

2.2 Representation of Female Agency in Literature

Recent literary studies emphasize the importance of women-centered narratives in challenging societal oppression (Spivak & Mohanty, 2009). Novels such as *No Honour* and *Someone Like Her* are part of a growing corpus of Pakistani English literature that foreground women's resilience and agency. Scholars argue that the literary representation of strong, independent women not only challenges dominant social narratives but also provides a critical lens for examining institutional failures that perpetuate abuse (Rahman, 2005). Ayesha, the protagonist, exemplifies this agency, navigating familial pressure, societal expectations, and violent trauma while actively seeking to rebuild her life.

2.3 Trauma, Recovery, and Psychological Realism

Khan's work also contributes to discussions around trauma and recovery in literature. Psychological realism in literary studies emphasizes portraying authentic emotional and mental states of characters experiencing trauma (Caruth, 1995). Ayesha's journey from victimhood to resilience demonstrates this, reflecting both the individual psychological impact of acid violence and the social context of recovery. Similarly, the inclusion of Kamil, a male survivor of domestic abuse, expands the discourse on trauma, highlighting gendered expectations of masculinity and the stigma surrounding male vulnerability in South Asian contexts (Jafri, 2018).

2.4. Literature as Social Critique

Several studies suggest that fiction often functions as a tool for social critique, especially in contexts where legal and societal systems fail to protect vulnerable populations (Bakhtin, 1994). Khan's novel exemplifies this, exposing gaps in justice for acid attack survivors in Pakistan, critiquing societal normalization of violence, and portraying the resilience required to challenge systemic failures. By setting the narrative transnationally (Pakistan to London), Khan underscores the universality of trauma and the potential for cross-cultural solidarity and healing.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in close textual analysis to examine the representation of trauma and empowerment in *Someone Like Her* by Awais Khan. The research is primarily theoretical, integrating trauma theory as articulated by Cathy Caruth with Foucauldian notions of discourse, power, and subjectivity.

The analysis is conducted in two interrelated phases. First, drawing on Caruth's trauma theory, the study explores how trauma is narratively constructed through fragmentation, repetition, silence, and belatedness. Particular attention is paid to the ways traumatic experiences disrupt linear temporality and are expressed through gaps, absences, and symbolic language in the text. This phase seeks to uncover how the protagonist's psychological suffering is encoded within the narrative structure and how memory and voice function as sites of both repression and revelation.

Second, informed by Foucauldian theory, the study examines how systems of power and discourse shape the protagonist's identity and lived experiences. Using concepts such as power/knowledge, subject formation, and disciplinary mechanisms, the analysis interrogates how patriarchal norms, social institutions, and cultural discourses regulate female bodies and voices. It further investigates how resistance emerges within these power structures, enabling forms of agency and empowerment.

The primary data consists of selected textual excerpts from the novel, chosen through purposive sampling based on their thematic relevance to trauma and empowerment. These excerpts are analyzed through thematic and discursive coding, allowing for an in-depth exploration of recurring patterns, motifs, and ideological constructs.

By synthesizing Caruth's emphasis on the unspeakability of trauma with Foucault's framework of power and discourse, this methodology provides a multidimensional approach to understanding how trauma is both experienced and socially constructed, and how empowerment is negotiated within and against dominant structures.

4. Textual analysis

4.1. Ayesha as a Site of Trauma

Ayesha's character embodies Caruth's conception of trauma as a delayed and intrusive phenomenon. The acid attack she experiences is not only a physical assault but also a profound psychological shock, whose full impact unfolds over time. Her initial response—fear, disbelief, and paralysis—is compounded by recurring memories and anxiety, reflecting Caruth's argument that trauma resists immediate comprehension and often returns in fragmented ways. Khan carefully portrays Ayesha's struggle to reconstruct her identity in the aftermath of violence. Her relocation to London symbolizes both a physical and psychological attempt to reclaim autonomy, yet the persistence of trauma highlights that recovery is neither linear nor complete. Through Ayesha, Khan illustrates how trauma is a lived, ongoing experience rather than a finite event, foregrounding the emotional and social dimensions of survival.

4.2. The Exercise of Patriarchal Power

Foucault's theory of power and discipline can be applied to analyze the social and cultural forces that facilitate Ayesha's victimization. Patriarchal structures in the novel represented by her family's insistence on marriage to Raza, societal expectations of obedience, and honor-based norms, operate as mechanisms of social control. Raza's act of violence can be read as both an individual assertion of power and a reflection of the broader patriarchal discourse that enforces conformity.

The acid attack itself functions as a disciplinary tool, intended to punish defiance and reassert male authority. Foucault's notion that power is exercised through subtle forms of social regulation is evident in how Ayesha's independence in her career, her romantic choice, and her refusal to conform is systematically challenged. This reveals that violence in the novel is not only physical but also embedded within social structures that monitor and punish behavior.

4.3. Kamil and the Hidden Dimensions of Power

Kamil, a male survivor of domestic abuse, provides a complementary perspective on trauma and power. His vulnerability exposes how patriarchal systems also constrain men, particularly by stigmatizing emotional expression and victimhood. Through Kamil, Khan challenges conventional notions of masculinity, demonstrating that the exercise of power affects individuals differently depending on gender, cultural expectations, and social status. Caruth's trauma lens helps highlight Kamil's internal struggle with memory, shame, and emotional recovery, while Foucault's framework contextualizes his marginalization as a product of societal power relations.

4.4. Reclaiming Agency and Resistance

Despite the trauma and systemic oppression, both Ayesha and Kamil engage in acts of resistance, reclaiming agency within restrictive social structures. Their attempts to rebuild their lives through relationships, work, and self-determination reflect a negotiation between personal resilience and structural constraints. Foucault's idea of power as relational rather than purely repressive is illustrated here: while societal forces seek to discipline and control, individuals can exercise resistance within these structures. The novel therefore portrays recovery not only

as psychological healing (Caruth) but also as a strategic navigation of power dynamics (Foucault).

4.5. Narrative Structure as Trauma Witness

Khan's narrative style itself reinforces the interplay of trauma and power. The fragmented, emotionally charged narrative mirrors Caruth's conception of trauma as nonlinear and disruptive. Simultaneously, the depiction of societal institutions, family dynamics, and honor-based ideologies foregrounds Foucaultian power, revealing how narrative can serve both as a witness to suffering and as a critique of oppressive structures. The novel's dual focus on internal psychological states and external social pressures exemplifies how literature can bridge individual trauma with systemic analysis.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Someone Like Her exemplifies the complex interplay between trauma, power, and social structures. Through the experiences of Ayesha and Kamil, Khan foregrounds how violence is both a deeply personal and a socially mediated phenomenon. Applying Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, it is evident that the characters' psychological suffering extends beyond the moment of the attack, manifesting in recurring memories, fear, and disrupted identity. Ayesha's trauma is compounded by societal expectations and family pressures, illustrating that recovery is not only a personal struggle but also a negotiation of social realities. Similarly, Kamil's narrative demonstrates that trauma transcends gender norms and highlights the ways in which patriarchal ideologies constrain male expressions of vulnerability.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the novel exposes how power operates through cultural norms, family structures, and social expectations, rather than merely through direct force. Raza's violence, the family's insistence on conformity, and societal attitudes toward women who resist patriarchy all function as disciplinary mechanisms. Foucault's concept of power as relational and omnipresent helps us understand that the novel's violence is embedded in everyday structures, and that acts of resistance, like Ayesha's relocation to London or her assertion of independence, are meaningful exercises of agency within these power dynamics.

By combining trauma and power frameworks, the novel illuminates the interdependence of individual suffering and systemic oppression. Khan's narrative underscores that healing and empowerment require not only psychological resilience but also the ability to navigate social structures that perpetuate inequality. Furthermore, by including male vulnerability through Kamil, the novel challenges the conventional understanding of gendered power, showing that trauma is experienced across the spectrum of social expectations and cultural constraints.

In conclusion, Khan's work illustrates that the study of literature through combined frameworks of trauma and power can reveal the intricate dynamics of oppression and agency, making the novel a vital resource for both literary and socio-cultural scholarship. It underscores the ethical responsibility of writers and scholars to confront social injustice, giving marginalized voices the visibility and attention they deserve.

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