War Memory, Psychological Trauma, and Literary Witnessing: Afghan Cultural Production in Focus

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Abstract
As non-literary accounts of post-traumatic stress disorder victims depict, and contribute to, history and memory, the present study uses the theoretical underpinnings of the psychological trauma theory to reflect on the flashbacks of Afghan trauma survivors, portrayed in the selected Afghan Anglophone fiction. The research project attempts to see how far the flashbacks of the traumatic memories of these characters contribute to the oft-quoted factual history. Borrowing from Caruth, Herman, Tal and LaCapra for the analysis, the study investigates the selected literary text to see how cultural productions from this war-torn country keep a record of the traumatic memories of the war that the Afghans were faced with during the Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989. This trauma analysis of Atiq Rahimi’s Earth and Ashes (2002) shows that analyses of trauma-induced flashbacks in literary portrayals of traumatized characters may, simultaneously, contribute to the officially recorded history of the actual event of trauma. The study concludes that related literary texts may be studied in conjunction with factual historical documents to get a holistic picture of any traumatic event as well as the related memory.

Keywords
war trauma, memory, PTSD, Afghan cultural productions, acting out and working through, coping with trauma mechanism, Earth and Ashes

Introduction to the Study
Termed by many as the graveyard of empires, the history and narrative of Afghanistan have been shrouded in the 35 years of long and continuous war (Imran & Xiaochuan, 2015). The country that comprises Aimaqs (10%), Hazaras (10%), Uzbeks (10%), Tajiks (25%), and Pashtuns (40%-45%) is known to historians and critics due to its invincible nature in front of all foreign forces, which invaded Afghanistan (Goodson, 2001; Imran & Xiaochuan, 2015; Katzman, 2010; Maass, 1999; Tanner, 2009). Since the mid-1700s, the country existed in the present form in South Central Asia, when Ahmad Shah Durrani united the tribal factions of the country (Dupree, 1977; Evans, 2002). Since then, the complete past and present of the country have been filled with prolonged wars, causing infrastructural collapse, political instability, and civil unrest. This has caused millions of Afghan civilians to leave their country for safe abodes in the neighboring countries and beyond.

According to Evans et al. (2003), “Afghanistan has, over its long history, been a highway of conquests between the West, Central and Southern Asia” (p. 10). This has led to the dismal condition of the Afghans, who even today, in 2020, are going through the trauma of a similar war in some parts of the country. Farhoumand-Sims (2007) asserts that the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan undermined the living standards of the people residing in the country, adding that the human rights violations have been at the worst in the civil war that followed the occupation. As soon as the Soviet forces pulled out of Afghanistan in 1989, the country fell prey to internal conflicts, which resulted in another foreign military intervention, leading to further prolonging the problems of the people in the country. Such a prolonged exposure to the ravages of war in the country has been collectively recorded not only in the history but also fiction that arises from this land, providing the true account of the psychological trauma of the Afghan people. Starting with the works of Sigmund Freud, to provide a brief introduction to trauma theory, the study uses the theoretical underpinnings, from the works of trauma theorists, such as Cathy Caruth, Dominic LaCapra, and Kali Tal, to carry out the analysis. For coping with trauma mechanism, the study also borrows from the work of Judith Lewis Herman for the analysis of the traumatized characters. Thus, the domain of the study, for the analysis of Atiq Rahimi’s Earth and Ashes, is delimited to individual (psychological) trauma, not collective or cultural trauma.

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As a society’s culture is either safeguarded or considerably changed through cultural productions, especially when the focus of attention of these literary pieces is a historical event that is as important as a war, this research investigates the selected Afghan Anglophone fiction in a bid to unveil the psychological cost of the war in Afghanistan. In this case, the societal realities may be understood through the individual accounts of the survivors of the war. Atiq Rahimi, whose work is investigated in this study, after seeing his homeland and its modern history as a tapestry rent and torn by invasions and internal conflicts, works in the capacity of a record keeper as well as a bridge between the society he has currently been living in and his Afghan abode. Such writers perform the duty of informing other societies about the losses they have witnessed in their own society. They, through portraying the trauma-filled lives of the protagonists, play an important role in highlighting the unfortunately bleak realities of the troubled Afghan civil society.

**Literary Portrayal of the War in Afghanistan**

Several Afghan writers responded to such tragic situations through their literary texts. Resting on both written and oral traditions, the often-termed-as-poeticized society, where most of what is written is poetry, both Pashto and Dari writers have resorted to express in both prose and poetry while reacting to the war in the country. In the words of Atiq Rahimi, even the Taliban poetry seems to brighten up the emotions through reason, when its language transforms from Islamic terminology and rhetoric to a pragmatic and sensual voice (Widmark, 2011).

In terms of the Pashto and Dari literatures’ immediate response to the war in the country, *The Idol’s Dust* was written by Zalmay Babkohi, when the country witnessed that the Taliban had destroyed the Buddhas of Bamyan in March 2011. Similarly, Mohammad Hossein Mohammadi wrote *Dasht-e Laili*, after the December 2011 Dasht-e Laili massacre took place. Besides, problems ensuing from living in exile is also a pertinent theme in the lives of the Afghans. In this regard, short stories by Khan Mohammad Sind and Parwin Fazi Zada Malal deal with the problems faced by Afghans, who are living in exile. Some other notable Afghan writers of literary texts in prose are Asif Soltanzadeh, Pir Mohammad Karwan, and Sher Zaman Taizi.

Other than prose, the following verses from poems in Pashto language by famous Afghan poets give a clue of what the survivors of war in this country have been feeling about the state of affairs in their motherland. A famous Afghan poet Ajmal Annd says in Pashto (one of the two national languages of Afghanistan):

*Da veeno pa watan keh laiy salgo sywa sah dee*

*Devay kho may da aokhko rawra salay to soghat keh*

*Khudaya da day toro tupako gharay zr wocheuy kre*

*Che mo da chum pa mazigar wkro da gulono baran*

[Translation: A person is searching the hills for the lost limbs of his young brother, who got withered in a bomb blast. What else one can find in this bloody region except sighs. So, please, my beloved, bring a light of glittering tear of your eye to my tomb. O God! Please unload these blackened guns forever, so that we can shower flowers on our village]. (Quoted by Khalil, 2012, p. 62)

Another Afghan poet Roaid Himmat depicts certain scenes of destruction, caused by a rocket attack, in the following verses in Pashto:

*Da chum pa jomatono mo bala tughundee raghlah*

*Imam pakay shaheed sho ao member pa veeno rang sho*

*Hadeeray dakay pa zwanano sholay*

*Dltha da murg bus tajrobay dee raba*

*Ta may joor watan kandar kandar kro*

*Ta kho za pa rogh zra bemar krma*

[Translation: A number of rockets have been fired on our village mosques. The imam (prayer leader of Muslims) of the mosque has been martyred and his seat, where he sits and preaches, is stained with blood. The graveyard has been filled with the dead bodies of our youth as if this place is a laboratory for experiments on deaths. You made a wasteland of my beautiful motherland, and my healthy heart is aching due to this brutality of yours]. (Quoted by Khalil, 2012, p. 62)

Just like the aforementioned verses from Pashto poetry, Afghan fiction in English has also been responding to, and portraying, the devastation caused by the war in Afghanistan.1–5

**Research Questions**

Keeping in view the holistic coverage that literary texts provide toward the portrayal of the war in Afghanistan, the current study endeavors to answer the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How do war trauma narratives, as depicted in literary texts, portray the psychological sufferings of victims?
Research Question 2: In what ways does Atiq Rahimi’s *Earth and Ashes* contribute to the historical accounts of the war in Afghanistan?

**Atiq Rahimi’s *Earth and Ashes* in Brief**

Atiq Rahimi’s (2002) *Earth and Ashes* recalls the Soviet forces’ invasion of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. The memories of the devastation, caused by the decade-long war, are still prevalent in the country’s cultural productions. In this particular novel, the protagonist, named Dastaguir, a grandfather, joined by his little grandson Yassin, is strolling along a dusty street from his town of Abqul toward the coalmines of Karkar to see his son and tell him about the destruction of their town. His journey begins after the Soviet forces, in the wake of plundering his town one day, had given back the following day to blaze it to the ground. As he was out of the town when the destruction of his village took place, he, upon his return, witnesses that his wife, children, his daughter-in-law, who is the mother of his grandson Yassin, and various villagers are dead. The Soviet forces have lighted the whole town to the ground, burning alive the inhabitants inside. Despite the fact Dastaguir’s grandson, named Yassin, has gotten away from the flames, he is currently (and absolutely), and all of a sudden, deprived of his hearing ability. Yassin is now, accompanying his grandfather on his journey to the mines where the latter wants to see his son to tell him of the destruction that they have witnessed. The ensuing incidents show how Yassin, out of his sheer innocence, sees his loss of hearing as a result of the Soviet Tanks, which, according to him, came and took away everyone’s voice. He does not think that he has lost his ability to hear but that all the people around him have lost their voice. On the contrary, Dastaguir is consumed by two consequences of this event. First, he remembers and mourns the destruction of his village and the cries of his loved ones that keep on haunting him; and second, he is repented why he did not die with the dead of his town.

On his way, he remembers all the losses and shares his grief with the people he comes across.

**Background to Trauma Theory**

Trauma: an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization. (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974, p. 465)

The essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences. (Van der Kolk & Bessel, 1987, p. 12)

The first ever examination of trauma started with the investigation into the concept of hysteria at the Paris hospital La Salpêtrière with French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, with whom Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet studied in the 1880s (Herman, 1992). The letters, which Freud wrote to his colleague named Wilhelm Fliess between 1887 and 1897, indicate that his concept of Nachträglichkeit came to the fore at the same time when the seduction theory of neurosis was developed. Freud (1950) refers to the concept of, what he terms, Nachträglichkeit or the retranscription of memories. He uses this term a number of times but does not project it in depth to the level of theorizing it. However, Jean Laplanche interprets it as the concept of “afterwardsness.” According to these trauma theories by Freud, “We invariably find that a memory is repressed and has only become a trauma by deferred action” (italics in original). Since then, the aforementioned “delayed reaction” phenomenon in trauma came under investigation, and has been discussed, by many researchers (Bistoen et al., 2014; Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Luckhurst, 2008; Young, 1995). Similarly, a number of empirical studies, which were carried out in this field, also endorsed the value of the deferred action (Andrews et al., 2007; Berninger et al., 2010; Bistoen et al., 2014; Carty et al., 2006; Yehuda et al., 2009). Moreover, a comprehensive analysis came to the conclusion that, on average, 38.2% and 15% of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) cases in military and civilian samples, respectively, have proved to come up with delayed reactions after they were hit by trauma (Andrews et al., 2007). It is also pertinent to mention here that an individual’s experience that she or he undergoes right after an incident does not qualify him or her for being traumatized until the given conditions are fulfilled (APA, 1987, 1994, 2000, 2013).

However, in the explanation that came before all the aforementioned studies, Breuer and Freud (1895) asserted that an effect that is created by the memory of an unpleasant incident is simply unavailable, when the incident takes place, adding that the memory of the incident arouses an effect with a completely new understanding of the incident that has taken place in the past. What they mean by this is that the victim of a traumatic incident comprehends the traumatic effects of the incident only after some time has passed and the victim is haunted by the trauma when she or he remembers that incident and encounters the trauma for the second time.

It was not until 1980 that trauma, related mainly to combat veterans, was investigated, discussed, and taken into thorough consideration. However, in 1980, the year that is known for marking the birth of the modern trauma studies, American Psychiatric Association (APA) acknowledged PTSD as a psychological disorder and included it in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III). The contemporary trauma studies got this recognition mainly due to the problems faced by the veterans of war in Vietnam. Later on, noted psychiatrists such as Judith Lewis Herman (1994) made attempts to include, into this
exclusively combat related disorder, other forms of traumas caused by terrorism, war, and domestic and sexual violence, as she made her publication in 1992 with the title Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. From then on, the contemporary trauma studies have been having a more inclusive approach toward trauma and PTSD, as it started dealing with traumatic events as varying in nature as terrorism, war, and domestic and sexual violence. Herman (1994) declares that the investigation into war trauma and sexual trauma follows the same trajectory, if considered their journey in the past. She says that the World War I and the ensuing trauma were studied as war neuroses or shell-shock, adding that it was replaced by PTSD during the studies concerning the Vietnam War veterans.

Keeping in view the aforementioned background to trauma theory, the following section carries out an analysis of trauma survivors as portrayed in Rahimi’s Earth and Ashes.

**Trauma-Induced Flashbacks and Their Contribution to History in Rahimi’s Earth and Ashes**

The power of trauma narratives lies in the fact that they have the capacity to augment history by means of providing information that is beyond the historical domains of mere counting the dead bodies of people who lost their lives, recording the damage to the infrastructure, and merely developing the dichotomy of the victim and the perpetrator. These literary depictions provide a much-valued peep into the minds of the victims, their sufferings, as well as their post-conflict lives—something that factual records will find valuable to augment the already available records with. This is how trauma-related literary texts enrich the already available knowledge on the traumatic effects of war. The analysis of Atiq Rahimi’s Earth and Ashes is carried out, keeping in view the model for engaging with trauma that seeks to work through the overwhelming events—a process which involves acknowledging and transforming the legacy of trauma while trying to leave its debilitating effects behind. The study, thus, focuses on how the protagonists come to terms with the shattering experiences by which they are deeply marked. The events, described in the novel, are not historical accounts by the novelist by any means; yet, these are important public forums in as much as they encourage the empathy of readers by illustrating the effects of the war on survivors, thereby carrying out the ethical task of preserving the vanished and often disavowed moments of the Afghan history. Before moving on, here is a brief debate on the connection between history and narrative.

Discussing the relationship between history and narrative, White (1973, 1999, 2001) is considered as one of the influential critics, when it comes to linking history with literary criticism. He is considered to be the first theorist, whose contribution to the debate on historiography and literary portrayals is well known due to his introduction to the concept of the narrative turn. Through his famous book, titled Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (White, 1973), he became famous throughout the related academic circles due to his discussions on language with the poststructuralist lens. Starting his thesis with a distinct emphasis on language, White (1973) argues that history can be accessed through language only, and that it should be written, before it can be accepted as history, adding that the whole discourse and the processes involved, thereof, can have several modes, which are connected to the past, through a discourse that is related to it. To this end, White (1999) asserts in Figural Realism that “historical discourses typically produce narrative interpretations of their subject matter,” (p. 3) where he mentions historical fiction through the use of the phrase historical discourse.

Just like White, Ankersmit (2010) also argues in favor of the historical function of the narratives, saying that the “metaphorical insight” that is not the information of factual nature is provided to readers through fictional portrayals (Pihlaiinen, 2002, p. 40). White further explains the value of these narratives, saying that these writings are not offering information that is completely new in nature but that they interpret the incidents, which have already taken place. Thus, as White suggests both discourses use narrative techniques, historiographical and literary writings augment each other in making use of the content that is common for both. At this stage, he goes on to bring the idea of using factual events to create a narrative of literary nature, calling the whole project as “troping.”

Following White (1973, 1999, 2001) and Ankersmit (2010), who argue that narratives are metaphorical insights into the events, which have taken place, the present study investigates Rahimi’s Earth and Ashes in a bid to get this particular perspective of the reality that has been portrayed metaphorically. The claim of narrative to present the reality in a metaphorical way becomes even more strengthened when the characters, who are portrayed in the narrative are traumatized, because, as Tal (1996) asserts that the survivor keeps the most untainted and realistic record of history, such accounts provide a detailed and multifaceted account of history. Such literary texts can provide a peep into the psychological processes in the form of the traumatic impacts of such tragic incidents.

Vickroy (2002) says that trauma related literature, through its provision of a sociocultural critical analysis, provides a window of knowledge for the readers to see how people live the ideology and public policy, adding that as literature takes help from the research carried out in the fields of psychology and history, it also helps in providing the necessary supplement to other fields of study. Endorsing this role of trauma literature, Horvitz (2000) argues that trauma fiction, through bringing forth the cultural or sociopolitical setting that caused a certain traumatic incident, unmask the oppressive ideologies which either produce or legitimized the incident.
Survivor’s Memories of Traumatic Event, Acting Out and Working Through in *Earth and Ashes*

Despite the fact that Dastaguir, in *Earth and Ashes*, is suffering from the survivor’s guilt, he does not want to die because he has the burden of serving as the firsthand eyewitness to tell the tales of destruction at the hands of the Soviet forces. According to Caruth (1995), the accounts presented by the survivors of trauma give a genuine account of the related historical events. However, Tal (1996) criticizes Caruth’s viewpoint by drawing an analogy between the survivor’s mind and a videotape, saying that the memories recorded in the mind of the survivor cannot be perfect records of the actual events because they have already been turned into mediated images, revisions, and interpretations by the perpetual receptive framework of the survivor. Rejecting Caruth’s (1995) idea that “The precision of the survivor’s account is what creates history” (p. 22), Tal (1996) claims that precision has to be deemed different from accuracy, adding that such memories cannot be termed as faithful record of historical events. Despite disagreeing with Caruth on the aforementioned grounds and several others, Tal, however, says that it is out of the survivor’s debt to the dead that she has gone silent. There are no more voices in the world, but people’s voices and left. They even took grandfather’s voice away. Here again, Tal’s (1996) criticism of the precision of the survivor’s account of the traumatic events cannot be truthful. However, Caruth’s (1995) dealing of the matter is important in its own domain as she asserts that the survivor’s mind records the details of the event. More importantly, Tal (1996) builds on, and improves upon, her findings.

Recording memories of the traumatic events in the survivor’s mind has also been studied by Dominic (2001), according to whom the survivor of trauma will always be carrying something that is from the past, adding that this can be in the form of a presence that is haunting the survivor’s mind on a continuous basis. He further adds that when the survivor mentions the traumatic experience, she or he, in his thought, goes back to the same scene of trauma and is, thus, performatively caught up in the same situation.

The troubles of Rahimi’s protagonist are further exacerbated, when he comes to know that his grandson, Yassin, had gone deaf due to the excessive bombing by the Soviet forces (Solomon, 2004). Yassin, without knowing what “deafness” actually means, has suddenly lost the ability to hear. He does not know that he has gone deaf; rather, he thinks that the other people around him, and all the things that he can see, have lost their voices. He feels that the world, all of a sudden, has gone silent. There are no more voices in the world, but then he inquires: “Why are people moving their mouth?” (Rahimi, 2002, p. 9).

The only sense that the young Yassin can make of the destruction, brought upon his village by the Soviet forces, is that they took away everyone’s voice. Yassin’s spontaneous reaction, whenever he sees his grandfather crying, is to say:

> The bomb was huge. It brought silence. The tanks took away people’s voices and left. They even took grandfather’s voice away. Grandfather can’t talk even more, he can’t scold me . . .

(Rahimi, 2002, p. 32)

The aforementioned account supports Tal’s (1996) criticism of Caruth’s viewpoint, where the latter uses the videotape analogy to establish that the survivor’s retelling of the actual event cannot be accurate as it has already been interpreted by the receptive framework of the survivor’s mind. The way Yassin describes the event, as he says that Soviet tanks took away everyone’s voice, is quite different from the way the Soviet tanks bombed the village deprived him of his ability to hear. This is exactly what Tal wants to establish when she says that such records by the survivors of traumatic events cannot be truthful. However, Caruth’s (1995) dealing of the matter is important in its own domain as she asserts that the survivor’s mind records the details of the event. More importantly, Tal (1996) builds on, and improves upon, her findings.

They took everything from us. Everything was destroyed, even our homes were bombed. Three or four times we had bombs in our house . . . For a minute all our houses were shaking. Mirrors got broken and shattered glass came like rain on our head. Blood everywhere and people were dripping in blood because of all those ruins. So we had a very bad situation in Afghanistan. Many people lost their legs, hands and other body parts. (Dossa, 2005, p. 35)

Being deprived of the ability to hear after he witnessed the bomb blasts and the attack, the young Yassin relates everything to that attack. According to his understanding of the event, the only justification for not being able to hear other people’s voices is that the Soviet tanks might have taken away everyone’s voice. Here again, Tal’s (1996) criticism of Caruth’s (1995) belief in the precision of the survivor’s account stands true. Caruth is true to the extent that the survivor’s mind records the traumatic event as is the case with the young Yassin; however, believing in the accuracy of the details, provided by the survivor, can be misleading. This is the reason why Tal uses the videotape analogy to criticize Caruth for advocating the survivor’s account of the traumatic event as truthful.

Tal (1996) rightly points out that the way the survivor’s mind interprets the happenings can negatively affect the truth value of what the survivor describes about the actual event. In the same vein, the young Yassin, who went deaf due to excessive bombings, was narrating the event through his
Yassin’s inability to work through the trauma has led him to act out the incident that he has witnessed. As the victim is continuously haunted by the traumatic experience, he is living in a continuous state of fear and tragedy. At this stage, the victim has no respite, whatsoever, because he is not only experiencing nightmares but also the flashbacks of the nightmares, which are related to the trauma. He considers himself to be living in the past and in that exact moment when the traumatic incident took place. Hence, the victim has no sense or understanding of the past, the present, or the future.

Acting out, according to Codde (2009), is not supposed to be taking place only through nightmares; rather, it can happen in the form of committing unintentional acts, or through the tendency of forgetfulness and memory loss. According to Freud (1924), the victim, reacting to his feeling of memory loss, repeats doing what he did at the moment of the incident of trauma, to remember whatever he witnessed. In this case, the victim no more remembers what actually happened around him; rather, he acts that out. “He reproduces it not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (Freud, 1924, p. 150, original italics). The victim being haunted by, and obsessed with, the moment of trauma is symbolic of her or his inability to differentiate between the moment of trauma, which is the past, and the normal condition, which is the present. The victim is not capable of differentiating the memories of trauma from her or his present status.

In the same vein, for the impressionistic mind of Yassin, it is a very difficult incident to cope with, and differentiate from his everyday life. Hence, whenever his mind is triggered by the teardrops of his grandfather, he repeats exactly the same account that he has witnessed during the Soviet attack. Thus, whenever he sees his grandfather crying, he, unlike a videotape, starts narrating the event, the way he interprets it. Yassin’s condition supports Tal’s (1996) thesis, according to which the trauma survivor’s account may not be precise in terms of its truth value, mainly because the survivor’s mind, instead of recording the incident like a videotape, has started interpreting it.

The scenes of destruction, which young Yassin has witnessed, haunt him every now and then. The only thing he needs to repeat is the event recorded as well as interpreted in his mind. The moment he sees his grandfather mourn the destruction and the moment he feels his head pressed against his grandfather’s chest, he says: “Grandfather’s crying. My uncle’s dead. Mother’s gone . . . Qadir’s dead. Grandmother’s dead!” (Rahimi, 2002, p. 32).

Unlike Yassin’s acting out of the traumatic event, Dastaguir, being a mature and more powerful person in terms of his mental strength, compared with Yassin, has the ability to work through the trauma. Here, the victim is able to break the continuous spell of repeating whatever he has witnessed, and thus starts differentiating between the moment of trauma (the past) and the moment filled with the memories of trauma (the present), by starting to share with others whatever he went through. At this stage, as LaCapra (2001) asserts, the victim has the ability to put his grief and life beyond that traumatic event as separate parts of his life. The most important thing in this transition from the acting out stage to that of the working through is that the survivor should be able to break the repeated continuity of the moment of trauma and he should be able to talk to someone and share his grief, related to the moment of trauma.

As the victim of trauma goes through the pain of loss, the listener of the account should still be able to differentiate between the feeling of loss that the survivor has been going through and his own feeling of absence that he can witness in the victim. Once into the vicarious experience, the listener usually forgets this difference between absence and loss. This happens when the listener identifies himself with the person who has lost some of his loved ones, thus feeling the loss as the victim himself feels. In this case, the listener should be feeling the absence of someone from the life of the victim rather than feeling the loss as felt by the victim.

The listener, who acts as a secondary witness—the victim, of course, being the primary witness—should remain somewhat objective for him not to oversympathize with the victim and run the risk of sharing the feeling of loss that should be exclusive to the victim. This feeling of loss will turn into a huge generalization of historical trauma if the listener of a traumatic account forgets about this difference between absence and loss. Once caught in the feeling of loss, where it should have been the feeling of absence, while listening to an account of trauma, the listener enters the victim-specific mourning. Here, the trauma of the victim is turned into the trauma of everyone, who is unable to differentiate between absence and loss (LaCapra, 2001).

Despite being haunted by the continuous spells of memories, related to the attack, Dastaguir is able to look beyond the incident. This is the reason why, instead of staying drowned in the sorrowful impact of the incident, he decides to see his son, Murad, to tell him how he had been deprived of his whole family and what physical as well as spiritual injuries Zaynab had succumbed to. Dastaguir not only misses no opportunity to tell the world of the horrors he has seen but also remains resolute to see his son in the mines, as he, while on his way to see Murad, tells a shopkeeper, named Mirza Qadir,
No. brother, I’ve come only to see him . . . He knows nothing of the misfortune that has struck the family. On the one hand there’s misery of the bombing, on the other, the misery of telling such a thing to my son. How should I tell him? I don’t know. (Rahimi, 2002, p. 35)

The shopkeeper, after listening to Dastaguir, who thinks that it would be very difficult for Murad to tolerate the whole account of destruction, does identify himself with Dastaguir. He does not feel the pinch of the incident to the extent that Dastaguir has been feeling because that would have stopped him from distancing himself from the pain, which Dastaguir had been going through. Right in accordance with LaCapra’s thesis, the shopkeeper (the listener) can feel the absence of comfort from Dastaguir’s life but he does not feel the pain to the extent that Dastaguir has been feeling. As a result, he is in a position to help Dastaguir work through the pain, as he tells him about his son:

He’s strong, father. You must tell him. He must accept it. One day or another he’ll find out. It is better that hear it from you, that you tell him you are with him and share the burden of his sorrow. Don’t leave him alone. Make him understand that man’s fate contains such things, that he is not alone . . . (Rahimi, 2002, p. 36)

The moment of destruction is too extraordinary for Dastaguir to adjust to. This is the reason why that moment keeps on haunting him as he fears for his son, Murad, thinking that he might also burn in the same fire that has engulfed the rest of his family. He keeps on thinking about that moment and feels as if he has been seeing that incident, taking place in front of him every now and then. When haunted by these flashbacks, he is simply unable to separate the reality from imagination. He takes his fears for real, as he says: “It’s as if you live only in these images and dreams. Images and dreams of what you have witnessed and wish you hadn’t . . .” (Rahimi, 2002, p. 13).

Quite similar accounts of the ravages of war have been portrayed through the personal narratives of the Afghan survivors of the war. In Dossa’s (2005) interview with such witnesses of the war in Afghanistan, destruction of the aforementioned nature, which is quite similar to what Rahimi portrays in his novel, has been recorded. One of Dossa’s interviewees, named Nargis, who lost her husband and witnessed the destruction in Afghanistan, says:

I was in pain, a lot of pain. But I was not alone. Everybody lost someone: brother, sister, mother, father, son, daughter. It was war. Everyone got killed there. People got killed in huge numbers. (Dossa, 2005, p. 37)

Just like Dastaguir, the young Yassin has also not been able to have a sound and peaceful sleep as he is also haunted by the dreadful images of the attack. His sleep has also turned into “full of images, dirt, fire, screams, and tears . . .” (Rahimi, 2002, p. 13). This is the reason why Dastaguir does not yearn for a sleep like that of Yassin; however, he wishes that he may be able to sleep like any other child, who does not have images and memories of the past. He wishes for a sound sleep because he has been perturbed a great deal by the haunting memories of destruction. As a result, he looks out for an opportunity where he can share these memories with someone to mourn the grief and feel some ease.

The moment when Dastaguir had seen his daughter-in-law naked during the attack had been haunting and torturing his mind continuously. He imagines her, running naked from one tree to another, and he also imagines young Yassin naked with his mother. He calls for help, again and again but to no avail. This image has been haunting him, again and again, throughout the novel, emphasizing how torturous an experience it had been for the survivor. As soon as Dastaguir comes back to his senses and starts mourning the loss, this proves to be a trigger for the young Yassin to be haunted by whatever he witnessed, as he says: “Uncle’s dead, Mother’s gone . . . Qadir’s dead, Grandmother’s dead! Grandfather cries . . .” (Rahimi, 2002, p. 45).

Moreover, Dastaguir, having lost every one of his blood relatives except Yassin and Murad, and having been deprived of his house and everything that he had in his village, still manages to live. He still lives but with a burden on his mind. He does not succumb to the agony of destruction that was brought upon him and others by the Soviet tanks. He knows that he cannot avenge the destruction of his village. But he still lives. He lives for a purpose that he has not opted for out of a conscious effort; rather, he lives for a reason that is typical of the trauma survivors. However, to be living, he has to relate the incident of destruction to everyone he comes across. He tries to do so, all in vain though, when he meets the guard at the checkpoint; he repeats the same account of trauma, when he approaches Mirza Qadir; and he is resolute to see his son, despite all odds, so that he can speak his mind to him and inform him of what had happened to his family and the village. The reason is “that the survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories, they also needed to tell their stories to survive.” (Felman & Laub, p. 56) Thus, as White (2001) challenges the view that the narratives of history are removed from reality, saying that “It is absurd to suppose that, because a historical discourse is written in the mode of a narrative, it must be mythical, fictional, substantially imaginary, or otherwise ‘unrealistic’ in what it tells us about the world” (Felman & Laub, p. 22), the devastation caused by Soviet forces, depicted by Rahimi in the novel, presents the reality with a metaphorical insight. White (2001) advocates the fact that every fictional narrative gets some of its content from the world that is real and, in that, the reader is offered with some knowledge of that real world in the form of the narratives of history.
Conclusion

Rahimi’s choice for portraying the event of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is a factually real event that took place in 1979. The portrayal of the destruction provides a careful reader of history with many details of the war and its destruction. However, as White warns that it does not mean that the whole past will be reflected in a narrative of the past, Earth and Ashes also does portray the whole truth, mainly because literature, being different from history, answers to itself and is concerned with a truth that is oftentimes a moral or psychological one. This is against the second principle of Cicero, according to whom “the historian cannot omit any information”; however, the capturing of the whole past is impossible, and at the same time, the question of being able to know about the whole past has also been a pertinent issue in historiography. Moreover, it is impossible to portray and bring forth every single detail of an event that has been part of the history. Besides, the narratives cannot cater for the readers’ need to have a conclusive as well as definite view of the past incidents. As, “can we know the past?” remained the most pertinent question in historiography in the 19th century, there is every possibility that such narrative of the past will inevitably move on to engender further interpretations of the past events, more fictional narratives of the past, and increased discussions, based on such literary productions.

If every single narration of the past event is an interpretation of its own nature, it means that the greater the number of narratives about an event in the past, the greater the number of versions of that incident would be. White (2001) says that it can happen that a writer portrays an event in the form of an epic, while another writer presents the same event in the form of a farce, adding that it does not mean that one account is more truthful than the other, because it is all a matter of employment of the truth, concerned. Rahimi’s portrayal of the destruction, caused by the Soviet forces in Afghanistan, is yet another employment of the truth about the war in Afghanistan. The way this account augments history is by means by providing information that is beyond the historical domains of mere counting the bodies of the dead, recording the damage to the infrastructure and developing the dichotomy of the victim and the perpetrator. As Earth and Ashes portrays, such literary depictions provides a much-valued peep into the minds of the victims, their sufferings, as well as their post-conflict lives—something that factual records will find valuable to augment the already available records. This is how literary texts enrich the already available knowledge on the traumatic effects of war.

Thus, by being continuously haunted by the memories of the war, Yassin and Dastaguir, just like any other traumatized survivor of the war in Afghanistan and beyond, are recording history as experienced by individuals, who lived in that difficult moment of time. They are keeping the memory alive by informing everyone about the destruction that was caused by the Soviet forces from 1979 to 1989. Thus, the study calls for literary texts, which are related to any particular historical event, to be studied in conjunction with the related factually recorded history to get an all-inclusive, multifaceted, and multidimensional picture of the event.

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Notes

1. Such accounts of trauma can be authenticated through factual data as well. The mid-year report (2015) that was issued by the UN Human Rights Office and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) asserted that the killing and injuring of common people had increased so much during this year that it exceeded the last year’s losses. The report recorded that 4,921 civilians had been killed in the first 6 months of the year 2015. The complete report is available at: https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_protection_of_civilians_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2015_final_august.pdf

2. Expressing his regret over the civilian casualties, Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, who was the then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said,

   This report lays bare the heart-rending and prolonged suffering of civilians in Afghanistan, who continue to bear the brunt of the armed conflict and live in insecurity and uncertainty over whether a trip to a bank, a tailoring class, a court room or a wedding party may be their last. (p. 6 of the report in S.No. 1)

   The study further elaborates the trauma caused by the war, adding that the memories of the war are so intense that they make many survivors think of committing suicide. According to the report, “... 81% of women who were surveyed in Kabul reported a decline in their mental condition, where 42% showed symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and 21% said that they quite often or very often had suicidal thoughts” (p. 11 of the report in S.No. 1).

3. Accounts of detailed inquiries into the devastation, caused by these wars, in the form of comprehensive historical researches, highlighting the ravages of war during the 10-year-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the subsequent civil war, were conducted by the Sanayee Development organization (SDO), the Organization for Human Welfare (OHW), the Afghan Peace and Democracy Act, the Education Training Center for Poor Women and the Girls of Afghanistan, the Oxfam International, Afghan Civil Society Forum (ACSF),
the Association for the Defense of Women’s Rights (ADWR), the Cooperation Centre for Afghanistan (CCA), the Oxfam GB, and the Liaison Office (TLO).

4. The report (mentioned in S.No. 3), following the aforementioned detailed study, covers problems, which the people in Afghanistan faced due to the wars from 1979 to 2009. The report also outlines the destruction caused by the 10-year-long war (1979–1989) in the following words:

After decades of relative stability, the overthrow of Daud Khan in 1978 and the subsequent invasion by Soviet forces in 1979 marked the beginning of a prolonged period of conflict. As mujahadeen resistance groups grew in strength, waging guerrilla warfare and drawing Soviet forces further into the conflict, the abuses committed by both sides intensifies. In the years of conflict that followed, more than 870,000 Afghans were killed, three million were maimed or wounded, a million were internally displaced and over five million forced to flee the country. (2009, p. 9 of the report in S.No. 3).

The complete report is available at: https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/afghanistan-the-cost-of-war_14.pdf

5. Beside outlining the killing, maiming, and displacing of the Afghan people during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the report (in S.No. 3) also highlights the psychological problems faced by the Afghan people during this war. It brings forth how the war affected the lives of the Afghan people, who were either forced to leave their country or live their lives amid fears of blasts and battles. The report details losses to the infrastructure that collapsed and was, then, hardly restructured due to the ongoing clashes, adding that the standard of living in Afghanistan could hardly improve as complete peace could not prevail during this period. It also carries out interviews to gauge the psychological damages, caused by the war. According to the report, a whole generation has grown up in the war and in a condition where they could never see complete peace around them.

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