

Literary Responses to the War on Terror: A Psychological Analysis

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Abstract

*Politics as theory and practice of the power, and the existence of authoritative structures for the governance of a country remains among the staple contents of imaginative literature. The catastrophic incident of 9/11 at the turn of the new millennium has not only impacted the international politics but also resulted in the proliferation of political ideas in the literary writings. Glut production of fiction on War on Terror exposes the readers to the wide range of ideological constructions regarding the issue. Compared to the theoretical discourse, fiction serves as a better medium to persuasively depict the emotional and psychological traumas of the local population whose lives continue to suffer years after the 9/11 tragedy. In particular, Fatima Bhutto's novel *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) counters the fixed ideas about War on Terror. By portraying the social and political relationships and institutions within which this evil conflict thrives, she draws into our imagination the understanding and reality of the War on Terror, and to those who are its worst victims. For Bhutto, the psychological understanding of the worst victims of war on terror reveal that neither West nor the Pakistani state has suffered those dire consequences that the youth of the tribal areas face. As a consequence of this unending war, their fate is sealed as 'lost generation', both as a result of denial of justice, and the destruction caused by war on terror.*

Key Words:

War, Terror,
Youth, Tribal
Area,
Psychological
Effects

Introduction

The Shadow of the Crescent Moon is written by Fatima Bhutto, whose name is well known because of her political background. Belonging to the well-known Bhutto family that had remained in power for generations in Pakistani politics, her novel raises controversial mediations regarding the ongoing war on terror at the time

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when Pakistan faces severe challenges due to the ongoing insurgency in the tribal belt of the state. Bhutto's sensitivity to the war on terror largely draws on the idea of social justice and an abhorrence to oppressive institutions. An important evidence of this countenance is her fiction where we find the tendency to create human characters whose emotions, feelings, actions and fates are constrained by the devastating effects of the political ideology of war on terror. The present paper aims at deconstructing the psychological and social concerns and the critique of structural and institutional exploitation of the youth of the tribal area as portrayed in Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013) in the name of countering the war on terror

Textual Analysis of Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2013)

The image of two airplanes hitting the twin towers as repeatedly shown on the media channels has stayed entrenched on the minds of historians, politicians. Although fiction does not have the magnitude of reality, but a political fiction does have the power to bring into life the subjective and experienced realities of the ordinary people through the portrayal of fictional characters. Bhutto's fictional narrative opens with the description of a "white house on Sher Hakimullah road" located in one of North Waziristan's tribal town, Mir Ali that is situated near the Pak-Afghan border. Immediately after the brief picture of the local bazaar where on the roof tops of the buildings "snipers lie in their nests, surrounded by sandbags, their military rain ponchos cold and clammy against their necks" (Bhutto, 2013, p.1) From an epigrammatic reference of the army's presence in the town of Mir Ali, wherein the narrative is set, the omniscient narrator skillfully turns the reader's attention to the inside of the house. "Soggy towels and wet bath mats lie around the bathroom. Socks that stepped in soapy puddles and have to be discarded are strewn on the floor. Muddy footprints of dirty shoes that stomp through the wet-tiled bathroom leave traces of black rings from towards room to room"(Bhutto, 2013, p.1).

The imagery related to the messiness of the bathroom and bedrooms is complex and detail, however does not offer any hint regarding the particular stress point which results into the disorderliness of this private space. An accurate understanding of the actual reason is revealed much later in the novel. However, this narratorial shift from the public space to the inside of the house destabilizes the dominant perception of war on terror as a political issue while drawing attention to the chaotic state of the personal space of the local youth. A messy room is also a sign of the occupant's depression and stress. Later the narrative also drop the diagnostic hints of the female occupant depression responsible for her lack of energy and interest as well to keep the living space organized. Psychologically, lack of concentration makes the real task of organizing an individual's room

impossible. If a person is depressed and stressed out, she believes in not deserving a clean space and organized living.

The political fiction by Fatima Bhutto is filled with the instances and events where readers eye witness the characters psychological sufferings as a consequence of war in their area. The remote area, a town in the middle of nowhere, situated between Pakistan and Afghanistan is not very kind to its residents, either male or female. All the residents are surviving through poor conditions of health and education. Not only these two major facilities are next to absent, but the living conditions in context of human relationships and future of youth are also at serious risk. The ‘war on terror’ has made their lives miserable and stolen them from their right to youth, laughter, happiness, love and life. Bhutto (2013) projects the lives in the following words:

The citizens of Mir Ali were not permitted by federal order to gather in groups of three or more in any public space, but the Islamic Republic could not ban people from sending off their dead with a Muslim prayer... Funerals and burials and prayer evenings became the meeting ground for the resistance.. Even the dead were enlisted in the battle against the state. (p.50)

Firstly, to consider the conditions of health, the people of ‘Mir Ali’ could not have been worse. The presence of a hospital is a miracle, given the circumstances and massive destruction in that area. The life long war on terror has snatched them the right to medicine, as Bhutto describes the condition of ‘only’ hospital in that area, ‘Hasan Faraz Government Hospital’. The hospital supplies arrive quite rarely, only at the times “when it is safe enough to guarantee delivery” (Bhutto, 2013, p.48). It is unsafe for the medical supply to reach Mir Ali’s only hospital, openly snatching people of their right to health and medical treatment. However, “when they come at all, shipped from Baluchistan” the condition of those supplies is horrible.

There are pills taken out of their boxes and sold in strips with the expiry date scratched off the foil, a polite gesture from the Chinese distributor who insists on hiding what already everyone knows- that the medicines are older than many of the doctors. (Bhutto, 2013, p.48)

The expiry date “scratched off the foil” is termed as a ‘polite gesture’ by the ‘Chinese contributor’ as there is no other way for them to get medicines. Even though these medicines are expired and must be disposed, the human beings living in Mir Ali have their last hopes in the form of those expired strips of medicines. The gesture is kind for them as it gives them a hope, hope that the medicines might be useable, and expired a few days or months before. Due to lack of facilities their lives depend on these medicines. This lack of medicinal facilitation is definitely impacting the physical health which in turn effects the psychological and mental health. According to Ohrnberger, Fichera and Sutton (2017), an individual’s mental health has serious implications on his physical well-being. Healthy food intake along with medication also brings positive emotional and psychological

health benefits. Similarly, Mujcic and Oswald (2016) asserts that wellbeing and happiness have a positive correlation with the fruit consumption. Contrary to this, citizens of Mir Ali are portrayed as deprived of proper health facilities, and the injustice behind this denial also their emotional vulnerabilities.

The gravity of the situation is noticeable by the fact that it did not matter for authorities that the “Syrups for the children congeal in their dark-brown glass bottles, and antibiotics well past their dues date are prescribed to the old and the infirm” as these unusable medicines are the best they can receive in the name of health care (Bhutto, 2013, p.48). Their deprivation has made them desperate, and in their desperation, they have reached a point where “The very word ‘antibiotic’ is magical. No patient who is prescribed them dares to ask what the effects of ingesting expired antibiotics at double doses might be” (Bhutto, 2013, p.48). The reason for such desperation and lack of care is the war they have been living in for last uncountable months and years. The value of human life has reduced to the extent where they have lost their ability to realize the significance of their own self. While living in a place, where thousands are killed every day without any reason, without any justification and without any pity they know the lack of significance of their existence. Safety and security are one of the basic and essential needs of an individual. Maslow’s need hierarchy explains the ranking of needs where it grades the ranking of security and safety needs at the second basic level. In this regard, Uriel Abulof (2017) argues that Maslow’s theory of need hierarchy elaborates the human nature as being something which most humans perceive and acknowledge in them and others as well This worthlessness has turned them desperate and made them reach a point where these expired medicines are the luxury they all can’t afford. These poor medical conditions include the “polio vaccines” which “reach the hospital unrefrigerated” (Bhutto, 2013, p.48). Without realizing that the vaccines are for infants and small children they send them and use them which again shows their lack of care for the future generation of Mir Ali and their survival. The general state of the only hospital in the town is stated as:

The Hasan Faraz Government Hospital has stockpiles of tetanus, measles, BCG and mumps vaccines rendered completely ineffective by bureaucratic delays, but they are relatively new and look good, so the doctors snap their fingers on babies plump arms and inject them anyway. (Bhutto, 2013, p.48).

This imagery of small babies getting vaccinated in such inhumane manner by expired, useless medicines is shocking and personifies horror for the readers. In this age of medical advancement when human kind has discovered the cure for the fatal diseases such as ‘cancer’, ‘HIV, AIDS’ and Tuberculosis there exists a little town e on the face of earth where it is impossible for infants to get vaccination to ensure their survival and hope of healthy life.

Other than health, the department of education was also suffering from the authorities' lack of attention and care. One can only imagine a place where military had taken over the educational institute and each movement of students as well as professors is monitored by them. The freedom of expression, speech and movement is all denied to the residents of Mir Ali, due to their contribution in 'War on Terror'. Not only the entrance and exit are controlled by army but "another truck was parked in the quad. Soldiers roamed the small campus in the pairs and the students who wished to duck behind a department for a kiss or a furtive cigarette did so now under the eyes of the military" (Bhutto, 2013, p.67). The freedom which is the basic need of every human being has been denied to them openly. Psychologically this situation refers to a linkage with the decline of the emotional health as a consequence of the constant threat of insecurity and lack of freedom. Sense of freedom has a direct and crucial influence on the quality of an individual's life. Veenhoven R. (2014) also argues about freedom as being the opportunity to choose, in other words, absence of limitations to choose, which in turn ensures the good quality of life. In the situation presented by the author of the novel, freedom was denied for the victims which was definitely negative for them. They have been monitored by militants all around the day, on roads, in educational institutions as well as their own houses. The constant surveillance is everywhere "It is not just the university that has been snuffed out by the politics of occupation and suspicion. Mir Ali's schools have also been identified as dangerous" (Bhutto, 2013, p.61). The schools for kids are dangerous as these are the places where people can get awareness of their rights and the world around them. The constant slavery expected from them could be challenged if left unwatched in such places where there are books and education. Not only the physical bodies of students were regulated but their conscious was also controlled by them. In a place like Mir Ali everything is banned, one had to breath quietly to avoid getting killed as teachers were 'asked to report' everything regarding the behaviors of students. They were directed to

Report on the students who express separatist's views, on those who talk freely about their father's travels. They keep special watch on those prone to boast about a brother's strength, an uncle's recent exploits in training, anyone who speaks too fondly of the great sate's neighbor's or mention the years of 1947, 1971 (Bhutto, 2013, p.62).

To express their views on politics, on their family members, talking about politics, expressing an opinion on anything in general was dangerous. No one could express what they thought, they all had to keep everything locked, repress all their emotions and thoughts inside their heads and keep moving and keep living the robotic life they were asked to. In any other case, things got fatal as penalty for breaking rules in Mir Ali is 'death' in any case. The lack of respect for human life and reason for this echoing silence is given by Bhutto in case of Azmaray, a young student, who was fighting for his lost brother. The dead body of Azmaray, a bright

and intellectual philosophy pupil was found in the middle of the university's campus. It was not an ordinary death, it was a statement made by military. To further repress the people of Mir Ali, to scare them, to make sure they have nightmares. The dead boy of young philosophy student was found in such a condition that no one could possibly have wanted to witness. But again it was Mir Ali, a young death is not the worst thing that could possibly happen to anyone here. Other than cutting Azmaray's hair:

His gut was bloated. His left arm, broken in five different places, was twisted above his shoulder. His right arm, the one that had been holding the photograph of his brother, the junior professor, lay several feet away from the place where Azmaray's body was found. His teeth had all been removed from his jawbone. (Bhutto, 2013, p.67)

The condition of all the other students, the class fellows and specially the family members cannot be imagined. One brother was taken, never to return and other was killed to show the rest, what happen to those who challenge the authorities. These brutal strategies ensured the slavery and kept people engaged.

The lack of resources and violence all around in the city damaged the nature of human relationships and specially the psyche of youth of Mir Ali. People in that area were not allowed to share their grief and happiness with anyone. Their lives were secretive miseries everyone pretended not to know about. They all had to carry this unwanted burden with them all the time. There was this stinging awareness of their worthlessness which kept them at distance to each other. As described in the novel in case of Aman Erum and Samarra's relationship which suffered the consequence of their surroundings. Aman despite all her love and devotion to Samarra left her behind. He knew life in Mir Ali will never be easier. A dream of happy satisfied life, with a family is right of every human being which was denied to the youth of Mir Ali. This bitter realization was the case of their frustration and discouragement from hope.

As discussed above, Samarra and Aman Erum were in a happy relationship with each other, they were childhood sweethearts and the relationship was quite perfect until the day Aman realized that Mir Ali can never be the safe heaven they both desire to spend the rest of their lives in. he, being a practical gentleman knew it will never be safe here to have kids or even marry. Therefore, it was the start of the end of their relationship when he openly declared it to Samarra that he will try to provide for her "outside of Mir Ali, outside of this place where we can't sit in public for a cup of tea or walk our children to their school safely?" (Bhutto, 2013, p.41). a safe future and promising career both were impossible to be dreamed while residing in Mir Ali, and Aman being aware of it realized it sooner. This decision, no matter how rational and practical the cause of conflict was and acted as a major cause of the distance between them as Samarra was not ready to give up yet. She

was hopeful and had a lot of fire inside of her yet. Therefore, these were the words she spoke while they were discussing their future

I don't want to leave Mir Ali', Samarra said. 'I don't want to walk on roads that have no memory of my life. I want you and me to walk our children to school on streets we know by heart, streets that have known us since we were children' (Bhutto, 2013, p.41).

The deep association of Samarra and many other youth members of Mir Ali, i.e. Hayat was the reason it was undefeated. However, they were constantly struggling for their lives, the things human beings are born with the right to, such as life, dreams, future, education, freedom and safety were not available for them to enjoy.

Other than the availability of all these simple luxuries they were also denied the right to enjoy a normal family life, which is quite important to sustain the sanity of human being. "The whole population suffered from trauma and depression. Every norm of family life had been destroyed by the war" (Bhutto, 2013, p.28). 'trauma and depression' were now the ways of their lives, not only the grownups but the kids suffered this trauma too and might as well more than the grownups as they were unable to understand why everyone around them tends to get killed so soon without any apparent reason.

As generally perceived by readers, war trodden areas are not the very suitable places for kids to grow up with healthy minds. The kids of Mir Ali had to suppress all their innocent questions, they were not allowed to ask. They had to suppress their way through the questions regarding the disappearance of their parents, their siblings and the queries regarding the sudden, bloody deaths of their family members. One can only imagine the traumatic after effects of those experiences on the lives of children in Mir Ali as "Most children had witnessed extreme violence, death, mutilated bodies and had lost at least one family member. They suffered from nightmares and depression and a lack of trust in adults who could not protect them" (Bhutto, 2013, p.28). These severe forms of psychological disorders were spread throughout the generation without any recognition for their far fetching after effects and consequences.

At some point talking about the consideration of psychological disorders is far cry as we have already discussed the conditions of health in that place. A country where expired, pigmented antibiotics are considered blessings and unrefrigerated vaccines are used to inject infants who could imagine giving a thought about the traumatic experiences, nightmares and psychological disorders of people. It was not only the children who suffered from these traumatic disorders, depression and nightmares but most of the adults as well. Hayat "grew quiet" and preferred to keep his thoughts to himself and so did Samarra. She went too far on the path of self-destruction, far enough to forget herself and her family. She reached a breaking

point after her experiences of sexual exploitation, betrayal and disappearance of loving father.

Conclusion

The in depth psychological analysis of the chosen narrative reveals that peace cannot be ensured in the absence of justice. The continuing militancy, as portrayed by the narrative, is the younger generation's annoyance with the constant surveillance of their personal and public space, denial of basic health facilities, wrong educational strategies along with the historical neglect of the development of this area. The complex emotional and mental issues faced by the youth of the tribal area reveal the truth behind the war on terror. For them, it's a war for the peace being fought as a consequence of the concerned authorities' premeditated ignorance of the plight of the youth residing in the tribal areas. The younger generation of Mir Ali live under the shadows of unhappiness and misery. Bhutto, by fictionalizing their experiences, gives this message to the readers that every effort to end this on-going war would be fruitless and wasted without understanding and addressing the material conditions of the desperate younger generation living in the tribal areas. It is their desperation and dejection that makes them tread on the roads of violence. Instead of spending million and millions of dollar to curb the war on terror, according to Bhutto, an address to the humanitarian needs of the citizens of the tribal areas would lead to the peace and stability of the entire world. Their humanitarian needs include provision of better health facilities, competitive and progressive educational programs, religious liberty and social and cultural autonomy. When the basic needs of the youth involved in the violent activities will be met, they would serve the people rather than kill them.

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