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History, Fiction and Trauma: Unveiling the Unspeakable in the Novel *Amu*

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Abstract

Post-independent India has witnessed several horrific incidents of communal violence. The largest communal riot happened in the year 1984, in the capital city of New Delhi. But after the occurrence of the Anti-Sikh Riots of 1984, there was silence surrounding the incident. The silence was primarily caused by the trauma inflicted from the incident. There are reasons to believe that the silence was politically motivated too. However, the role fictional writings have played in communicating the traumatic memory of the incident was significant. This paper studies the novel *Amu* written by Shonali Bose to understand the representation of traumatic memory of the community. The paper attempts to problematize the decades-long silence surrounding the incident and the novel's role along with other similar fictional accounts in unravelling the truth of the incident.

Keywords

History; Unspeakability; Trauma; 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots; Fiction; Silencing

Introduction

The examination of the psychological impact of catastrophic events on individuals has been a focus of academic research for an extended period. However, only in recent times has the sociological or communal dimension of this impact been recognized. Caruth, in her renowned work *Unclaimed Experiences*, contends that trauma is never isolated to the individual ([Caruth 1996](#), p. 24). While early scholars primarily focused on individual trauma, they were not oblivious to the interconnectedness between individual and societal trauma. The notion that 'one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another' ([Caruth 1996](#), p. 8) also reflects this perspective, suggesting that trauma can be understood as an experience resonating across communities globally. In this context, trauma extends beyond individual victims to encompass entire communities, fostering a sense of collective suffering that transcends borders, thereby embodying a cosmopolitan experience and concept. Thus, the significance of trauma extends beyond the individual level and intersects with the broader notion of a cosmopolitan civil society.

The introduction of the concept of 'cultural trauma' marked a pivotal moment when scholars began to analyze the collective aspect of traumatic experiences. In the introductory chapter of the book *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004) Jeffrey C. Alexander who has been influential in popularising the concept of cultural trauma pointed out that 'cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness' ([Alexander 2004](#), p. 1). Alexander, in this section, has observed how, after the occurrence of a catastrophic event, cultural groups are even involved in the construction of cultural traumas. The intervention of politics and dominant power groups in deciding and managing the formation, magnitude, and operation of cultural trauma is not a disputed one in the area of trauma theory. What enters the cultural memory of a community and what does not are issues handled by different forces operating within the national boundary. Sometimes, such horrific incidents are made to be forgotten and hidden for a long time. Literature plays a major role in addressing this issue. Exposing the intervention of political interests and the influence of dominant power groups in a long-suppressed event has been carried out by the literature.

The intention to have a second look at the riot scene, even though it was the most horrific incident post-independence India had witnessed, may raise questions. The official reporting of the incident started appearing after more than fifteen years. To move on by carrying the most fearful hidden truths shall not be convincing to at least a few people. The most heinous violence India witnessed remained undiscussed until very recent times. Writers, who are the mirrors of reality in society, started looking into this issue after a long gap of almost two decades. Even those attempts were not successful in showing the social responsibility and ethical concern the issue demanded and deserved.

This paper attempts to analyse one of the more widely read novels written so far based on the impacts of the incident. The focus here is to make a reading of Shonali [Bose's *Amu*](#) (2004) which is set against the background of New Delhi during or after the occurrence of the riot, and attempts to bring out the impacts of the silencing which was intended to primarily hide the horrors of the riot. To be forced into silence about an incident which had already been traumatically unspeakable adds a lot more misery to the tormenting situation of the victims. As a field of study that allows the examination of literary texts to unravel the representation of traumatic experiences, the possibilities offered by Literary Trauma Studies in studying the literature of the 1984 incident seem promising. It also attempts to address the ongoing hegemonic oppressive silencing which even blocks open narration and comprehensibility and thereby does not allow the discursive formations which are necessary for those who are undergoing trauma. The paper also endeavors to acknowledge the universal nature of traumatic suffering, despite recognizing the inherent socio-cultural variations in trauma experiences, aiming to contextualize it within the framework of a cosmopolitan society.

The History of 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots

Post-independent India has witnessed several horrific events of communal violence. The events, which wounded and stained the progressive secular goals of the newly formed democracy, continue to occur in different magnitudes and forms. Such disasters and mass killings appear to be mostly one-off incidents that directly or indirectly are linked to the Partition of India and Pakistan which happened in the year 1947. The Anti-Sikh riots of 1984 happened in Delhi, the capital city of India, as an immediate result of the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. The killing was found to be instigated by a chain of events which had been in making for decades since Independence, most importantly the Gandhi led government's implementation of Operation Blue Star a few months before the incident ([Singh 2009](#), p. 18). Delhi witnessed a series of violent incidents which were focused on the Sikh population, where thousands lost their lives. When the official reports of the number of people who were killed in the pogrom were estimated at 3350, the unofficial independent estimates reported the number of deaths to be many more than that.

The fact that the truth and transparent data of the horrific incidents were either not reported impartially or there were unscrupulous political influences to hide the real data added to the severity of the violence. To mention the significant fact, the official records and the unofficial estimates of the number of people who were killed are mismatched. The final death toll is still not estimated correctly. Sanjay Suri mentions in his book *1984: The Anti-Sikh Violence and After* (2015) that the estimate of death rounds up to 2,733 as per the report submitted in 1987 ([Suri 2015](#), p. 196). Suri says, 'The reason to round that estimate off to around 3,000 is the input from police officers about a very large number of unclaimed and dumped bodies' ([Suri 2015](#), p. 197). He mentions that the reason for an estimate of around 3,000 is that the total is likely to be somewhat more than the number determined by the Ahuja Committee. Suri's observations continue with details about unofficial reports which he finds are more believable though they are considered unreliable. The unofficial estimates according to him were closer to the truth than any official records ([Suri 2015](#), p. 197). The incident resulted in the killing of more than 6,000 Sikhs in Delhi itself according to Khushwant Singh as he has mentioned in Dr Sangat Singh's book *The Sikhs in History* ([Singh 1995](#), p. 45). If the observation of Khushwant Singh can be considered valid, the number of deaths which happened in Delhi put together with that of other parts of India would reveal a shocking count.

The truth seems lost somewhere. The exact reporting files depicting the clear details and number of deaths that happened do not seem to exist now. The police are criticized as either hiding the facts or they were incapable of collecting the real information and hence getting a transparent picture of the whole incident. Even the media was prevented from reporting the truth. Suri has pointed out that the copies of *Indian Express Daily*, under which he had been working as a journalist during the time of the riot were found to be missing. Neither print media nor any television channels could report even a vague picture and severity of the pogrom ([Suri 2015](#), p. viii).

The lack of official records by the police and government, and by any other independent media, resulted in preventing the people of India, especially the victims, from understanding the exact dark nature of the event which occurred. Even 35 years after the riot, there does not exist a clear image of it. Such an absence of information becomes a significant factor as far as cultural trauma is concerned. Even years after its occurrence, the whole picture of the riot, the truths have been hidden from the common people. Manoj Mitta and H. S. Phoolka have mentioned the admission made by the first Sikh Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh while addressing the Lok Sabha in 2005, about the persisting feeling about hidden truths and about not being able to serve justice to the victims ([Mitta & Phoolka 2007](#), p. 7).

What can be undoubtedly drawn from the observations made by scholars, victims, and journalists about the riot is that the vagueness regarding the situation till today is not accidental. Beginning with the mass killings and violence that happened after Indira Gandhi's assassination to the persisting blurring of facts, the

ever-ongoing inquiries, and changes in the findings of each committee have been monitored and controlled illegally by political parties. Ashish Nandy wrote in *Outlook* reviewing *When a Tree Shook Delhi: The 1984 Carnage and Its Aftermath* coauthored by Manoj Mitta and H. S. Phoolka that ‘the book exposes how a regime can use not only the state machinery but also the judicial process to subvert justice. It is almost a handy guide on how to organize a communal riot and then escape the consequences’ (Nandy 2007). Here, it becomes clear that there is historical amnesia regarding the incident’s facts. There has been in practice a deliberate neglect of historical events, facts, or experiences as the above-mentioned scholars have pointed out. Since official narratives have frequently minimized or disregarded the facts surrounding this sad occurrence, the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in India provide a stark example of intentional historical amnesia.

Literary Narratives About 1984

The 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots was the second largest event to spark a literary flowering after the Partition of India and Pakistan. In their unique fictional ways, these many literary universes attempt to relive and recapture the horrific character of historical events and the wounds they have left on the impacted population. These works of literature have a strong connection to the events of the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots and appear to be a response from the community to the profound damage the occurrence caused to society. These literary works make an effort to convey the truth of what transpired during the three days of violence as well as the pain it inflicted on the impacted population.

The history of the 1984 violence has been subjected to planned omissions and misrepresentations through hegemonic interventions. Till very recently, the narrative about the incident deviated from reality. Some narratives, both fictional as well as historical have started revealing the hidden agendas of the then-ruling government which in reality had organized this well-planned heinous violence. But, without any doubt, it can be said that the issue was not addressed as it should have been, and the suffering of the people which in reality has to be addressed primarily is still today unwritten, unheard and not dealt with. In an article discussing the repressive measures carried out by the government during and after the 1984 violence, the writer Parvinder Mehta proposes that ‘there is the need to further unveil the repressive practices and initiate paradigm shifts around the hegemonic discourse of 1984, that projects only a single dangerous story, perpetuated mostly as a rehashed narrative based on the official history’ (Mehta 2015, p. 4).

The reality of the pogrom which happened and the reality of the suffering the people have gone through have started becoming the concern of writers and historians. But they do not seem to portray all aspects fully, as a major part of the truth is lost due to the years of concealing measures taken by political forces. Apart from the lack of information available about the incident, there are also hurdles caused by the victims’ confrontation with trauma in the years which followed, thereby blocking the understanding and narration about the riot. Literature describing the 1984 riots seems affected by the repressive measures implemented by the ruling authorities to control the transmission of truth among the public, along with unspeakability caused by trauma. The literary works that have been published in the past two decades include novels like *Helium* (2013) by Jaspreet Singh, *Amu* (2004) by Shonali Bose, *Pages Stained with Blood* (2002) by Indira Goswami, *The Assassination* (2017) by Vikram Kapur, *Stillborn Season* (2018) by Radhika Oberoi, *Saffron Salvation* (1999) by Simarjit Kaur, etc. There are other writings like the anthology of personal essays and short stories edited by Vikram Kapur titled *1984: In Memory and Imagination: Personal Essays and Short Fiction on the Anti Sikh Riots* (2016), *The Night of the Restless Spirits* (2020) by Sarbpreet Singh, and Black *November: Writings on the Sikh Massacres of 1984 and the Aftermath* (2019), edited by Ishmeet Kaur Chaudhry.

These literary works, which span a variety of genres, can be seen as a component of a broader cultural movement aimed at creating a discourse that challenges the prevailing narrative that currently exists. The various literary reactions make an effort to relive and recall the horrific aspects of the historical events

that left the impacted community's collective consciousness wounded. Even if the artistic reactions were subjected to a protracted period of hegemonic repression, they appear to have played a vital part in exposing the repressive methods that were in place and in presenting a completely rewritten account of the incident. It is noteworthy to observe that the emergence of these artistic creations coincided with the start of the 21st century. As previously said, the unfathomable scope of the disaster and the state's determination to stifle those who voiced their concerns led to a prolonged period of silence that ended decades later and gave rise to these works. These pieces belonged to the sporadic resistance voices that later surfaced and helped to shape a discourse opposing the prevailing one. Even if these artistic endeavors captured a variety of realities and experiences from various angles, one thing that seemed to be common to all of them was the language of trauma as a crucial component. The literary efforts show that trauma extends beyond individual victims to involve entire communities, nurturing a feeling of collective distress that surpasses geographical boundaries, thus exemplifying a cosmopolitan experience and concept.

The Unspeakability of Trauma

Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman, Dori Laub and Anne Whitehead are among the well-known researchers in the field of Literary Trauma Theory who are now regarded as pioneers of the First Wave of Trauma Studies. Freud had a direct influence on their theories. These scholars called attention to the unrepresentability, the unspeakability, the recurring incidents, and the psychological damage of trauma. They make the argument that the psychological impact of the incident is so great that it breaks the mind's capacity to understand it and describe it in words. In the foundational book on traumatic experience titled *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth defines traumatic experience as 'unclaimed' (Caruth 1995, p. 4). She famously pointed out that it is the literary language which attempts 'to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available' (Caruth 1995, p. 4). She suggests that traumatic experience is 'inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility' that is associated with traumatic memory (Caruth 1996, p. 92). It has been later pointed out by many notable scholars that an experience of a traumatic event turns into the unspeakable because of various factors and literature's role has been significant in identifying this (Lothe 2020, p. 152).

Unspeakability has been considered a major trait of traumatic experience. It is that the inability of language to describe the real incident because of unknown reasons, and the character's or the narrator's failure to comprehend the accident or event, which is the core reason for developing a traumatic state, are connected. Altogether, the traumatic memory remains as 'the unexplainable' and 'the unnarratable'. Caruth puts forth that 'the traumatic truth in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language' (Caruth 1996, p. 4). It seems that traumatic experience for an individual is incomprehensible and hence inaccessible by the normative ways of perceiving human experiences, as well as by the normal communicative language. This is where the role of literature becomes relevant. Literature plays the role of communicating the otherwise unspeakable and incomprehensible. The role the literary medium has been playing in documenting the trauma of the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots is, in this context, significant. Volkan (2023) notes the role of creative and artistic expressions in healing the scars of traumatic incidents like slavery and racism in the article 'Mass Traumas, their Societal and Political Consequences and Collective Healing' (Volkan 2021, p. 14). Literature, especially fiction, has been able to match up to a great extent with the conditions for the narration of horrific experiences with its unique literary techniques: symbolization, indirect language, gaps, figurative language and the like. In Laurie Vickroy's observation, 'Fiction provides a wealth of thick description of the conditions and characteristics of traumatic experience' (Vickroy 2014, p. 138).

Looking from the theoretical grounds of cultural trauma, the role of literature can be viewed as a meaning-making process involved in overcoming the forced silencing and belatedness after the horrific

incident. of the 1984 riots. Gilad Hirschberger's observations about cultural trauma and meaning-making become relevant in this context. Hirschberger has pointed out the trajectory of cultural trauma that gradually leads to creating meaning and making sense of an incident which has been incomprehensible ([Hirschberger 2018](#)). Literature of the 1984 riots, in this sense, can be seen as involved in the meaning making process. Alexander's observation of the involvement of cultural groups in the construction of cultural traumas through various cultural processes after a catastrophic incident also becomes significant in this context ([Alexander 2004](#), p. 1).

The intervention of politics and dominant power groups in deciding and managing the formation, magnitude, and operation of cultural trauma is not a disputed one in the area of trauma theory. The phenomenon which leads to the formation of cultural trauma after the occurrence of a catastrophe, the intensity of its operation in the society, and even the forgetting of the incident, are not always innocent. What makes its way into the cultural memory of a community and what stays out is handled by hegemonic forces operating within the national boundary.

Does such a delayed appearance and discussion of the catastrophic suffering and resultant cultural trauma affect the formation of the public narrative about it? Will there be again sustained political interests involved in the narration and discussion of it? How does it work across different mediums? And do such artistic endeavors bring out the political involvement or collude with it un/intentionally? After all, if those attempts are sincerely dedicated to bringing out and openly discussing political conspiracies and suppression, are they affected by the shock and unspeakability of the incident? These are the questions I attempt to answer through the analysis of history and [Bose's novel *Amu* \(2004\)](#).

Trauma and Unspeakability in the Novel *Amu*

Novels written based on the incident of 1984 are centered on the realities and facts which were available to the writers. The characters and situations seemed trapped between the real events of history and the writer's imagination. *Amu* by Shonali Bose both fictionally and historically investigates to find the truths about the incident. The novel is about a young Indian who settled in America and came back to find her roots, Kaju, who was called in the name Amu in her past. Kaju, at the beginning of the novel itself, expresses an unrecognizable need to connect with the past emanating inside her. The novel begins with Kaju leaving America which had been her home since she left India when she was just three years old after being adopted by Keya, into whose family she was welcomed as a member. During her visit, she felt connected to India, especially the city of Delhi, its streets, the Sikh religion, and the people. However, she fails repeatedly to identify the roots of her connectedness on her return to India.

Kaju's visit to Delhi, which was once her home, starts to bring back her memories, which till then were hidden from her by the family of Keya. A particular incident occurs as Kaju explores the streets of Delhi upon her return. Bose writes, 'They passed by a small sweet shop, where a little girl in red ribbons was holding out some coins and pointing at a jar. She stood perfectly still so that Kaju almost reached out to touch her and check that she was real. Her reaction might have shown since Kabir asked if something was the matter. She shook herself out of her trance and said no' ([Bose 2004](#), p. 41). From here onwards traumatic memories from the past start to visit her. Overwhelmed by a sudden influx of memories from the past, she struggles to pinpoint and make sense of them. The indistinct recollections render her immobile, enveloped in a trance-like state. The past begins to visit her with vague hallucinations and nightmares despite the attempts of her foster family to hide the reality of her past from her.

Amu had been a direct witness to the murder of her father and brother. The uprooting from India to America cut the roots of her memories of her violent and painful past. But her visits to the ghettos to meet Gobind and his family, the ambience of the ghettos, the nearest railway station, narrow pathways, and Gobind's three-year-old daughter bring back the haunting past to her conscious world. The novel develops

and reveals itself through the psychological dilemma of Amu and the people around her while attempting to have an understanding of the past. Bose writes about Kaju's dream at night which symbolises her search for truth in a wasteland, 'Bublee entered through the door and went down what seemed like a long, black, never-ending tunnel. When she came out at the other end, she was by a rubbish heap at the edge of slum. It was a gigantic wasteland... On the far side, a figure turned. It was Kaju' ([Bose 2004](#), p. 44).

The past remained elusive and incomprehensible until she ultimately unveiled all the events that transpired. Kaju's nightly dreams about Bublee, Gobind's daughter, stemmed from her frequent visits to the ghetto. In these dreams, Bublee symbolized Kaju's childhood, navigating through an elongated, dark, and seemingly endless tunnel. Progressing through the tunnel led her to an expansive desolate area at the slum's conclusion. Here, she encountered a figure dressed in black, tirelessly excavating a hole, bearing a striking resemblance to her own face. This dream sequence metaphorically represents Kaju's persistent efforts to delve into her hazy and distressing past. The scene in the dream metaphorically stands for Kaju's encounters with her memory of the past which are vague and unreachable. The inexplicable nature of trauma which lies beyond the possibilities of language can be well established in this dream narration. The complex nature of the traumatic memory appears in the form of scattered thoughts and vague visuals.

While narrating the journey of the protagonist to unearth the realities about her birth parents and past life, a set of characters and their traumatic memories about the 1984 riot also comes to light through a close reading, which otherwise is left unspoken by the narrator's voice. The novelist not only conveys the collective character of trauma but also highlights how the state's efforts to silence the occurrence were coerced. Through her protagonist, Bose also makes evident the importance of communicating the truth and impacts of the incident just like any similar incident that affects an entire section of people. The riots of 1984 are portrayed as an incident that hampered a large section through the lingering traumatic memory of different characters.

The novel's characters are based on their lifestyle, social and economic background, academic standards, and most importantly the way they were to be made part of the riots voluntarily or involuntarily, and how they observe it in the present falls into different mindsets and categories. Manoj Mitta's and H. S. Phoolka's collaborative writing explains how far the poor were subjected to that violence compared to the Sikhs who had better living standards and who were known among the public. In their words, 'Given their inability to muster resources to defend themselves, the poor were generally more vulnerable to eruptions of mass violence' ([Mitta & Phoolka 2007](#), p. 25).

Hinting at the real incidents, the novel subtly leaves commentaries about the government's attempts to hide the reality and to force hegemonic violence by preventing any possibility of the real information of the atrocities being exposed through the character, Arun. Arun's role in the disaster is made clear in the novel. Kaju's attempts to uncover her tragic background are gradually accompanied by the revelation of Arun's involvement in the 1984 riots as a high-ranking bureaucrat in the nation's capital. The book also demonstrates how the authorities made Arun play a certain role, which traumatizes him into being a culprit. The portrayal of his son's and wife's trauma highlights the cultural aspect of traumatic memory.

In addition to Arun's trauma, which is shown as the trauma of a perpetrator, a few other characters' traumas are also depicted to highlight how well-planned the tragedy was. Gobind's trauma serves as a suitable illustration in this case. He fails to realize his role as a puppet in the hands of those in power and as a result, lives a traumatized and guilt-ridden existence after engaging in violent acts. Even though his involvement was forced and accidental, it causes him to experience 'a moment of no return' and he ends up living a life filled with misery and remorse. Gobind makes an effort to steer clear of discussions regarding the riot, blaming it on his shame and his inability to confront the reality of his past. When his uncle narrates the killing of his friend Balbir during the incident, Gobind finally encounters his guilt and trauma. Bose writes, 'Tears began to roll down Gobind's broad face. 'He didn't kill Balbir, Chacaji; It was me. Then

speaking became impossible. He was wracked with sobs. The uncle put his arms around the nephew and held him close and, in their silence, Kaju and Kabir mourned along with them' (Bose 2004, p. 97).

Another character who goes through similar trauma is Kishan Kumar. Kishan Kumar suffers from delusions related to his past transgressions. He has an alcohol problem and has a challenging life because of the trauma caused by the incident. Unlike Gobind, who accepts responsibility for the incident, he accuses the event's organizers of being the true offenders. The narrative of Kishan Kumar's anguish exposes the political party's complicity in the tragedies. When asked if he was involved, he defended his position by outing the people who were responsible.

Beyond meticulously and accurately reconstructing the violent episodes, the story serves as a commentary on political involvement and attempts to counteract governmental brutality and atrocities. If not for the government's and political parties' involvement, these activities would have remained secretive and never been publicly acknowledged. According to Parvinder Mehta, in the film *Amu*, the film adaptation of the same novel directed by Shonali Bose herself, 'the references to the 1984 violence become a frame, shadow, rather than the complete picture' (Mehta 2015, p. 16). A close examination of the novel also reveals how far what he has pointed out best suits the novel. There are gaps and erasures in the novel as a kind of 'negative historiography' according to Mehta. Mehta uses the term negative historiography to reveal the absence of adequate background information and misrepresentation of it in the context of the riots (Mehta 2015, p. 16). However, it becomes evident that the insufficient information, often criticized as 'negative historiography,' is more accurately attributed to the deliberate suppression of facts by authorities. Bose addresses this aspect in her writing through her protagonist's inquiry, aiming to unveil the truth behind the incident.

The novel sheds light on the riot experiences and trauma undergone by multiple characters though the central focus is Kaju. Gobind expresses the guilt and trauma he has been going through to Kaju and Kabir with much hesitance. The widows Kaju and Kabir visit while searching for Kaju's birth mother, live on with the traumatic memory of the riot. The character whom Kaju at first thinks of as her father leads a life fully devastated and hunted by the haunting past. Keya, Kaju's mother, struggles to cope with the disturbing memories of what she had witnessed and experienced while she was in Delhi during the riots. Kaju's family members, Gobind's uncle, Kabir's family and other minor characters in the novel can also be observed as living with the traumatic memory of the pogrom. Their traumatic memories remain undiscussed until Kaju becomes the reason for them.

The first mention of Kaju's haunting past appears in the seventh chapter of the novel. The narrator says, 'She always ran whenever she was upset. When Kaju ran, it was as if she could hear a voice, like a whisper in the wind calling out to her. She couldn't get that voice out of her head. She would run faster and faster as if she just had to get somewhere, but she didn't know where or why' (Bose 2004, pp. 37-38). Being upset makes Kaju run, because of an unknown cause. This points to the childhood experiences she had gone through during the riot which is revealed in the final chapter of the novel. Amu from her hiding place, where her mother had kept her during the time of the violence, runs to find her mother after seeing her father being attacked by the perpetrators. The run, which is repeated like a ritual, whenever she is depressed in her life is an involuntary attempt to gain back life and normality, to gain back the lost lives of her parents. Kaju has an intense motive to escape from the horrific past.

The eighth chapter titled Red Ribbons gives many hints about the past of Kaju and its incomprehensible nature. During her visit to Gobind's ghetto, the next day she imagines the sound of a train as if it is a hallucination. She hears the sound of the train and sees the vague flashing of a red dupatta¹, almost surreal for the first time irrespective of any cause. Her visits to the narrow and congested place she thinks, 'She had

1 A dupatta is a long, rectangular scarf or shawl traditionally worn by women in South Asian countries

ever been in' (Bose 2004, p. 40), bring back the real-life experience of hearing the train's sound, while her father was being attacked by the rioters. Seeing the small girl wearing red ribbons plays as a connecting link to her past. The next paragraph explains, 'They passed by a small sweet shop, where a little girl in red ribbons was holding out some coins and pointing at a jar. She stood perfectly still so that Kaju almost reached out to touch her and check that she was real' (Bose 2004, p. 41). The ambience of the street, the sweet shop and the girl in red ribbons bring back memories of her past to which she is unable to have access. The small girl reminds Kaju of her childhood and the memory of the past and tries to reach out to her in this situation.

The reflections of the past played again in the present, which stands unrecognizable even to Kaju, is transferred to the reader giving a surreal experience. Kaju encounters one more strike of her incomprehensible past in the same chapter. Kaju's first visit to a Delhi street after moving to America brings back the past in a rather imprecise and scattered manner. Gobind's ghetto works as the bridge connecting her present with the past, which had been long forgotten. The narrow streets filled with noises, houses with congested rooms, children and so on, work as silent agents in bringing back her suppressed painful past. Another instance which brings back memories of her past happens when she is in the very same street,

Kaju looked around at the staircase as she waited for Kabir. She sat tentatively on the lowest step, feeling overcome by a sense of déjà vu... a boy jumped out of nowhere, dashing right by her. Close behind, there were two men, screaming, 'Pakadoharami ko! Bachnena paaye!' Her heart hammered furiously and she felt herself break into a cold sweat. Why was she having such a strong reaction? She was not one to be so easily unnerved (Bose 2004, p. 42-43).

The sense of déjà vu while they were still in the ghettos, 'the hammering of her heart furiously' and breaking into a cold sweat, after seeing the small boy being chased by two men, all seem connected to her past. While Kaju is left wondering in the feeling of bewilderment, the reader as well as the narrator stumbles and finds it difficult to explain and as a result to understand it. This incident appears to her like a replay of how her father was thrashed to death by the rioters.

Kaju's real past is established slowly as the story progresses through several similar incidents. Kaju occasionally encounters revisits of her past. The train sound she hears whenever she visits a crowd or slum is a significant example of the attempt of the writer to connect Kaju to her past in a rather enigmatic and vague manner. 'A couple of hours later, Kaju and Kabir walked down a densely crowded street with Gobind, Leelavathi and their children... Suddenly, she heard the sound of a train. She wondered if she had truly lost it in these few weeks in Delhi hearing trains whenever she went into a slum' (Bose 2004, p. 62). Kaju's past along with other characters in the novel is incomprehensible and unreachable. Rather than the forgetfulness of an unintelligible incident, it appears more as the years-long attempts of the ruling forces to suppress the horrors of the incidents. The whole unrecognizable nature of her traumatic past fails even to be registered in the conscious mind and results in the unspeakable dilemma. Though the main focus is Kaju, characters like Gobind, Keya and others go through this very same uncertainty and dilemma.

Kaju's investigation to discover the truth, which had been denied to her since childhood, metaphorically stands for the whole society's endeavors to uncover the realities of the incident. The trauma Kaju and other characters undergo in this novel represents the cultural trauma being faced by generations of Indian citizens who have been directly or indirectly linked to the incident. As noted earlier, *Amu* the novel was adapted into a Bollywood movie under the writer's direction in the year 2005. The film was not allowed to be telecast across the nation, because it mentioned the hidden secrets about the riot and the involvement of the government agencies in it. In reply to the question asked by the Censor Board of India about why the young people of India should know about a history that was better buried and forgotten, Shonali Bose later wrote, 'Such history cannot be buried and forgotten. Young people cannot make their future or understand their present without knowing the past' (Bose 2007). The film was required to be edited and some dialogue

removed which had mentioned the truths of the incident. The Censor Board Chief Anupam Kher was fired for passing *Amu*, according to Bose in the same document.

The novel struggles to narrate between the unspeakability inflicted by the agents of power and the unspeakability of the trauma of the victim population. This is reflected through the protagonist and her continuous struggles to make meaning out of the strange experiences she has been undergoing. The enforced silence and the suppressed, unnarratable state formed are different from the unspeakable nature of the traumatic experiences. The narratives of the 1984 riot were influenced by both forms of unspeakability. Even years after the incident, the real picture and the exact details of the atrocities and killings that happened stay hidden to a great extent. According to Parvinder Mehta, 'Any silence, voluntary or involuntary, about violence/ resultant trauma only creates a gap and emptiness. Writers must have made efforts to remove this gap and emptiness created by the initial struggles with the silence' (Mehta 2015, p. 11). The efforts, even though they were less, came from the side of writers themselves later on. Though *Amu* was not the first literary attempt in that category of both historical and fictional endeavors, it has received more public attention. Bose's efforts and representations of a censored historical incident are greatly appreciated. 'Clearly Bose's passion for an artist's need to reveal necessary truths about the genocide that not many people in the world know about is expressed through the protagonist's curiosity, her eventual surprise and horror upon learning the reality behind her covered-up history' (Mehta 2015, p. 16).

Antonious C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo Suarez Orozco in their anthology *Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma* analyze the impact of violence on the society. They discuss the relationship between a violence-stricken society in which the victim population lives and the massive cultural trauma they have to undergo. According to them, 'violence continues to shape the inner, interpersonal and socio-cultural worlds of victims and their children' (Robben & Suarez Orozco 2000). In the context of the novel, the effects of violence rule the psyche of the characters. The measures of forgetting were always implemented upon Kaju since childhood, representing the large number of victims, who were coerced into forgetting the incident. It was never innocent and there were political interests involved to make the victims keep silent, not to grieve, and thereby suppressing their trauma for years, which resulted in the displacement of actual memory and monstrosity of the event. The characters, still haunted by past violence, learn to live in harmony with the present. The realization of the violence she and her family had to undergo leaves Kaju less disturbed, and relieved. In a way, it can be observed that the public or official discourse of the trauma of 1984, formed by the public intellectuals, the media and academia, as observed by Ann Kaplan (2005), fails to address or transparently mark the intensity of the trauma of the victim group. There are sincere attempts from the side of the writer to bring out submerged truths about the violence. But at the same time, there exists either the inefficiency to comprehend the intense trauma of the Sikh population, or the interference of political power groups to monitor the forgetting, of which the writer is unaware.

Conclusion

The analysis undertaken in this paper aims to tackle the research questions outlined in earlier sections. Upon close examination of literary works centered on the Anti-Sikh Riots, it becomes apparent that the prolonged suppression and distortion of facts surrounding the incident have significantly influenced the construction of its historical narrative. The incident's reality appears fragmented, and its history has faced the looming threat of being erased for an extended period. Nonetheless, it is essential to highlight the role played by fictional writings in portraying the traumatic repercussions of violence. By challenging official narratives, they serve to prevent the erasure of historical truths and promote collective memory through the presentation of diverse human perspectives. It is evident from the non-fiction literature that active political interests have played a significant role and continue to exert influence over the historical narrative of the incident. The portrayal of trauma across various mediums, including fictional writings, films, and other artistic expressions,

has shed light on the multifaceted aspects of traumatic suffering. It is crucial to acknowledge the role of these creative works in uncovering the political forces at play. The analyzed novel serves as a notable example of this phenomenon. Bose, in particular, has intricately addressed this theme within the novel. Through Kaju's journey to uncover the roots of her traumatic past, the novel delves into the exploration and revelation of hidden political agendas surrounding the incident.

The novel emphasizes the importance of recognizing trauma as a universal and cosmopolitan experience. While the primary focus remains on the character Kaju, the author suggests that trauma stemming from communal riots extends beyond individual victims. It traverses communities and borders, indicating a shared sense of collective victimhood. The novel shows social responsibility and the necessity of addressing the faked historical amnesia and exposing the politics involved. The history of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots was significantly shaped by political considerations. The government at the time was accused of complicity and apathy, and subsequent administrations have been criticized for not pursuing justice for the victims. Bose's novel prevents the erasure of historical truths by challenging official narratives and fostering collective memory through the presentation of human perspectives. The analyzed novel reveals that there exists a common and deliberate disregard for the historical occurrence of the incident examined and its shared recollections which is traumatic. It can be seen that there is a collective forgetting or downplaying of the events that occurred. Similar literary attempts also mention the political involvement in the issue to varying degrees. *Amu* seems to be one of the earliest works of fiction to have attempted to disclose the truths behind the catastrophe. The lack of precision while addressing the issue of cultural trauma can also be observed as caused due to the 'forgetting' involved. There was complete silence from all genres for years caused by the agenda of forgetting inflicted by political forces. It took almost two long decades for literary works to start appearing. The effects of decades of silencing are evident in those works. At the same time, there are engagements from the side of the literary medium to disclose the politics involved in it.

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