

The Human Cost of Political Conflict: Trauma, Ethics, and Memory in Mirza Waheed's "The Collaborator"

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Abstract

This paper explores the psychological and ethical dimensions of political violence in Mirza Waheed's "The Collaborator", focusing on the human cost of the Kashmir conflict during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The study examines how trauma, memory, and moral ambiguity are represented through the unnamed protagonist—a young Kashmiri coerced into working for the Indian military to recover identification from fallen insurgents. Grounded in Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma and Judith Herman's PTSD framework, this paper analyzes how the novel articulates the internal collapse of individuals caught in systemic violence. Using close textual analysis, the study reveals how personal suffering intersects with broader political agendas, leading to alienation, cultural erosion, and existential crisis. The protagonist's experiences of grief, fear, and identity loss illustrate the devastating psychological consequences of living in a militarized zone. The findings highlight how literature can convey the inner world of trauma victims and bring attention to the lived realities of conflict-affected populations. By shifting the analytical focus from geopolitical narratives to human experiences, the paper contributes to literary trauma studies and underscores the necessity of empathetic engagement with war literature.

1. Introduction

War literature across cultures has long explored the profound human toll of armed conflict, shedding light on emotional and psychological scars that persist beyond the battlefield. From the trenches of World War I to the deserts of the Middle East, narratives of war offer a lens through which to examine individual and collective suffering, as well as the complex interplay of memory, trauma, and identity (Caruth, 1996; Herman, 2015).

Within this global context, the Kashmir conflict stands out as one of the most protracted and politically sensitive disputes in modern history. Since the late 1980s,

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Kashmir has experienced widespread violence, military occupation, civil unrest, and the erosion of cultural and communal structures. As a site of unresolved geopolitical struggle between India and Pakistan, it also embodies the silencing of human experience in the face of political narratives (Bose, 2003; Schofield, 2000).

While much of the scholarly discourse has focused on the political and territorial dimensions of the conflict, there remains a noticeable gap in research addressing the ‘human cost’—specifically the psychological trauma, ethical dilemmas, and cultural dislocation suffered by civilians caught in this enduring crisis (Kaul, 2011; Zutshi, 2017). This research moves beyond traditional geopolitical analyses to center on the lived experiences and inner worlds of individuals enduring conflict.

Mirza Waheed’s “The Collaborator” (2011) emerges as a poignant literary response to this gap. Set in the 1990s Kashmir valley, the novel captures the existential dilemma of a young man coerced into collaborating with the Indian army amidst the disappearance of his friends, the exodus of his village, and the silent unraveling of his cultural identity. The narrative dramatizes the ethical ambiguities and psychological trauma experienced by those left behind, forced into morally fraught choices under occupation (Kabir, 2009; Batool, Younus & Ahsan, 2020).

Framed through the lens of “trauma theory”—particularly the works of Cathy Caruth (1996) and Judith Herman (2015), this study interrogates how “The Collaborator” represents war trauma, identity dissolution, and cultural disintegration. Trauma theory allows us to explore the protagonist’s fractured consciousness, delayed responses to violence, and recurring psychological distress as narrative strategies that reflect the lived experience of Kashmiri civilians.

Accordingly, this study aims to examine the representation of the human cost of political conflict in Mirza Waheed’s “The Collaborator”, with specific focus on three dimensions: psychological trauma, moral ambiguity, and cultural dislocation. It argues that Waheed’s novel transforms the political struggle into a deeply personal and existential crisis, thus contributing to a broader understanding of the Kashmir conflict through the lens of human suffering and resilience.

2. Background Information

Set in the early 1990s, when tensions between the Indian state and Kashmiris fighting for azaadi (freedom) escalated, the novel reveals that such a place could not remain ‘forgotten’ for long. In “The Collaborator”, Mirza Waheed presents a powerful story through the eyes of an unnamed protagonist growing up in “the forgotten last village before the border” (Waheed, 2011, p. 184) which is in fact the Line of Control dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan. The narrative begins with the protagonist at 19, when his village’s former peace has long disappeared. Employed by an Indian army captain, he must retrieve ID cards and weapons from the bodies of Kashmiri ‘militants’ or ‘freedom fighters’, who had crossed into Pakistan for training only to be gunned down on their return. While the ID cards serve Indian military press releases, the corpses are dismissed as ‘dead meat’.

Waheed's prose portrays this haunting task vividly: "By the way, did I mention there's a profusion of tiny yellow flowers growing among the grasses here? . . . You can see bright yellow outlines of human forms enclosing darkness inside. It makes me cry . . . In some cases, the outline has started to become fuzzy now, with the tiny plants encroaching into the space of the ever-shrinking human remains. I don't know the name of the flowers. Some kind of wild daisies, perhaps?" (Waheed, p. 26) Searching among the dead could drive anyone to despair, but the protagonist also fears finding his childhood friends—Hussain, Gul, Ashfaq, and Mohammed—among them.

Structured in three parts, the novel alternates between past and present, showing how the protagonist's family became the only ones who stayed in the village while others fled, and recounting the beginnings of resistance as his friends left to train in Pakistan. Later, the story examines the fallout of their departure and the heightening violence in Kashmir before focusing on the protagonist's life as a "Collaborator" under the Indian captain. Waheed crafts a sensitive yet piercing perspective on life in Kashmir, away from political rhetoric, capturing what it means to live as both an "enemy" to one government and a "puppet" to another.

The book grips readers with tense questions: Why did this young man become a collaborator? Why is his village empty except for him and his parents? Why has his mother fallen silent? Why did his friends take up arms, and why didn't he? And how long can he listen to the Indian captain boast of killing Kashmiri boys? The story's focus on a single, isolated figure is profound. In his memories, the protagonist recalls friends and family, yet these relationships gradually fade as war raises walls of silence and absence—until his closest companions seem to be the corpses around him, the only Kashmiris of his age left nearby. Waheed avoids directly equating the protagonist's solitude with Kashmir's isolation in a war largely forgotten or distorted by the world, but the boy's experience echoes the greater plight of Kashmiris, rendering the novel anything but narrow in scope. In his memoir "Curfewed Night", Basharat Peer describes feeling embarrassed in Delhi bookstores that lacked "the unwritten books of the Kashmir experience." With Waheed's novel, that void begins to be filled.

The Kashmir conflict remains one of the most persistent geopolitical disputes, rooted in the 1947 partition of British India. During this division, princely states were given the option to join either India or Pakistan, creating a dilemma for Jammu and Kashmir, a region with a Muslim-majority population but a Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh. Initially seeking independence, Maharaja Singh ultimately acceded to India following an invasion by tribal militias from Pakistan (Ghosh, 2018). Over the years, Kashmir has experienced sustained unrest, including periods of intense militancy and intermittent attempts at peace, leaving the issue unresolved. As Shakoor and Waheed (2016) highlight, these conflicts have left an indelible impact on the region's socio-political landscape, fostering a continuous cycle of violence and instability. Despite numerous wars and diplomatic efforts, the status of Kashmir remains one of the most contentious issues in South Asia, symbolizing not

only a territorial struggle but also a prolonged human crisis (Batool, Younus & Ahsan, 2020).

3. Methodological Rationale and Analytical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design, using close textual analysis as the principal method to explore the psychological, cultural, and ethical dimensions of political conflict represented in “The Collaborator” by Mirza Waheed (2011). The novel is purposefully selected due to its rich portrayal of the human cost of violence during the Kashmir insurgency of the 1990s. It provides a compelling narrative that illustrates individual trauma, collective suffering, and the erosion of identity under militarized oppression.

The analytical framework is grounded in trauma theory, primarily informed by the foundational work of Cathy Caruth (1996) and Judith Herman (1997, 2015). Their models—particularly *hyperarousal*, *intrusion*, *constriction*, and *narrative fragmentation*—guide the examination of the protagonist’s internal experiences and memory disruptions. Supplementary concepts such as *desensitization*, *identity disintegration*, and *biopolitical erasure* further enrich the analytical lens.

3.1. Data analysis follows a three-step interpretive procedure:

3.1.1. Passage Selection: Through repeated close readings, narrative segments are identified that portray emotional collapse, ethical ambiguity, and psychological distress.

3.1.2. Thematic Coding: These passages are organized into four major trauma-related categories:

- Trauma Flashbacks and Intrusions
- Forced Complicity and Moral Ambiguity
- Cultural Dislocation and Identity Crisis
- Dehumanization and Desensitization

3.1.3. Theoretical Interpretation: Each theme is analyzed using trauma-theoretical constructs. Caruth’s notions of belatedness and traumatic memory, along with Herman’s trauma responses, provide the basis for decoding how psychological wounds are inscribed into the narrative. The study also assesses how literary elements—such as imagery, interior monologue, and symbolism—reflect the fragmentation of self and society under prolonged conflict.

To deepen contextual understanding, the analysis incorporates intertextual references from related trauma narratives, such as Basharat Peer’s “Curfewed Night” (2008), and situates Waheed’s novel within the broader discourse on Kashmiri literature, postcolonial trauma, and militarized identity.

This research is non-empirical, and therefore does not involve human participants. Ethical standards are upheld through rigorous citation practices, ensuring intellectual integrity and academic transparency.

Ultimately, this methodology allows “The Collaborator” to be read not only as a work of fiction but also as a testimony of the enduring psychological and cultural scars left by political violence, contributing to both literary criticism and human rights discourse.

Table 01: Thematic Analysis and Corresponding Trauma-Theoretical Constructs

Thematic Category	Representative Passage	Trauma-Theoretical Construct	Interpretive Focus
Trauma Flashbacks and Intrusions	"They just drop off the ridge like dolls... one after the other, ping, ping..."	Intrusion (Herman, 1997); Traumatic Repetition (Caruth, 1996)	Sudden recollection of violent memories disrupts narrative continuity and mental stability.
Forced Complicity and Moral Ambiguity	"Five hundred per trip and a small bonus for every ID and weapon..."	Moral Injury; Coercive Participation	Demonstrates ethical compromise and guilt under military pressure.
Cultural Dislocation and Identity Crisis	"All the boys... are gone, gone, no one left in the village..."	Identity Fragmentation; Displacement	Reflects collective loss and erosion of cultural belonging.
Dehumanization and Desensitization	"Bodies after bodies—some huddled together, others forlorn..."	Desensitization; Hyperarousal (Herman, 1997)	Loss of emotional response indicates long-term psychological numbing.

Existential Disintegration	"Go home, go home... sad soldier. Someday, you might die..."	Constriction; Hopelessness	Captures existential fatigue and mental withdrawal.
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4. Mirza Waheed: A biographical sketch

Born and raised in Kashmir during the early 1970s, Waheed's connection to the land and its people is foundational to his life and work. Growing up amidst the escalating tensions of the 1980s and early 1990s, Waheed witnessed the conflict's profound impact on ordinary lives. This personal history infuses his narratives with authenticity and depth, making his portrayal of Kashmir not merely geographical but also deeply emotional, political, and historical (Shakoor & Waheed, 2016). Waheed's close association with the region's landscape and his experiences of its tragedies have profoundly shaped his literary voice, allowing him to capture the nuanced psychological and social impacts of the conflict (Bose, 2003).

Waheed's debut novel, "The Collaborator", elaborates a powerful account of a young Kashmiri man caught between conflicting loyalties, offers a unique narrative that foregrounds the "human cost" of political strife (Batool, Younus & Ahsan, 2020). His subsequent novels, "The Book of Gold Leaves" and "Tell Her Everything", further establish his reputation for weaving complex narratives around socio-political issues, including themes of war, love, and ethical dilemmas (Zutshi, 2017). Through his works, Waheed not only offers insight into the Kashmiri experience of conflict but also challenges broader global narratives, prompting readers to reconsider entrenched perspectives on human rights and sovereignty (Kaplan, 2012).

5. The Protagonist and the Weight of Individual Trauma

5.1. Character analysis: The unnamed protagonist

Thousands suffer under the pervasive trauma of displacement, affecting families and communities alike. The narrator's mother, for example, embodies this fear of loss, expressing despair over Farooq's fate: "Such a gentle boy, such a handsome boy, curse on those who misled him, curse on this cross-border drama" (Waheed, 2011, p. 40). According to Herman's model of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), symptoms such as hyperarousal, or the constant anticipation of danger, and intrusion, where traumatic memories repeatedly resurface, are key responses (Herman, 2015, p. 35). The persistent sense of threat in the narrator's life is exacerbated by a 'latent' form of power and coercion, where, as Wrong suggests, authority is most impactful when maintained as an ever-present threat (Wrong, 1995, pp. 2, 7). This power dynamic is underscored in the narrator's mother's

caution against ‘this gun-shun business’ (Waheed, 2011, p. 40), as the Indian army’s actions instill fear and resentment within the community.

Following his friend Hussain's departure, “the universe of the village had changed” (Waheed, 2011, p. 109), and while the protagonist initially yearns to cross the border to reunite with lost friends (Waheed, 2011, p. 57), his drive fades due to coercive pressure and trauma. He muses, “Go home, go home... sad soldier. Someday, you might die in these parts and no one will claim you” (Waheed, 2011, p. 74), and curses Captain Kadian, who imposed this state of isolation on him as he navigates the valley of corpses (Waheed, 2011, pp. 74, 152). These experiences represent Herman’s concepts of intrusion and constriction, wherein trauma confines the protagonist’s choices, forcing him into a role he abhors (Herman, 2015, pp. 37-38; Bashir, 2012, p. 1). His interaction with Rouf Qadri’s corpse in his sleep, emblematic of a hyperarousal response, exemplifies the residual trauma that leaves him haunted, sleepless, and vulnerable to intrusive nightmares (Herman, 2015, p. 35). The brutality inflicted upon figures like Qadri by Indian forces, often misrepresented by the media, mirrors the distorted narrative presented to legitimize control over Kashmir’s populace

Through his unnamed protagonist, Waheed offers an intense portrayal of the anguish, moral dilemmas, and existential conflicts that accompany life in conflict zones. Rooted in memories of a once peaceful Kashmir, the protagonist’s journey from innocence to a coerced collaboration with the Indian military illustrates the societal fracture caused by political strife (Shakoor & Waheed, 2016; Ghosh, 2018). As he sifts through the belongings of the deceased, each ID card becomes a stark symbol of the human cost of war, reflecting not only the loss of lives but also the erasure of identities (Kak, 2011). The protagonist’s inner turmoil—torn between loyalty, survival, and trauma—mirrors the broader psychological scars borne by Kashmir’s people, as they navigate their fractured identities and values in a politically unstable landscape (Kaplan, 2012; Zutshi, 2017). Waheed’s narrative encapsulates the collective anguish of Kashmir, turning his protagonist into a profound emblem of the emotional toll exacted by enduring conflict (Schofield, 2000).

5.2 The role of a collaborator: Responsibilities and burdens

As a collaborator (mukhbir), the protagonist has the unenviable task of picking the identity cards and personal effects from the dead bodies of the militants across the LoC (Line of Control). His mission is a haunting reminder of how the identity of the individual and the identity of all people can be erased by war. Everything that he finds, everything that he writes, represents a silent proof of lives destroyed by war and of how civil war perverts persons and history (Shakoor & Waheed, 2016).

The protagonist’s responsibilities go beyond mere collection; he becomes an unwilling witness to the violent and tragic realities of the Kashmir conflict, confronted daily by its physical and psychological remnants (Amrita, 2018).

The protagonist's role carries a heavy emotional and psychological burden. Torn between his imposed duties and his loyalty to friends and community, he embodies the profound moral tension of those whose personal values clash with forced obligations. His collaboration marks him as an outcast, alienating him from his community, where he is often met with suspicion and distrust. This estrangement amplifies his internal conflict, especially as he considers his friends who joined the insurgency, making his role as a collaborator an isolating experience laden with guilt and moral ambiguity (Akther & Gul, 2022). His encounters with death and the personal effects of the fallen deepen his internal struggle, serving as constant reminders of the human cost of the conflict and the psychological toll exacted on those drawn unwillingly into the conflict's mechanisms (Nageen Rather, 2017).

Through the protagonist, Waheed presents collaboration as more than just a role—it's a representation of the intricate and often painful moral struggles that arise when personal loyalties, survival, and imposed duties collide. His character exemplifies the complex interplay between survival and morality in a landscape scarred by endless strife, where war reduces people to tasks and titles, obscuring their humanity (Ghosh, 2018). This nuanced depiction highlights the traumatic consequences of forced collaboration, emphasizing how political conflicts reshape individual identities and collective psyches, leaving lasting scars on those caught in the crossfire (Akther & Gul, 2022).

5.3 Psychological Manifestations of Trauma

Cathy Caruth describes trauma as initially signifying a “wound... inflicted on a body,” later evolving to mean “a wound inflicted... upon the mind” (Caruth, 1996, p. 3). Trauma involves “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” that triggers delayed and uncontrollable responses such as “hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). In Caruth's view, traumatic narratology—the recounting of trauma—depicts how oppressors' dreams can become nightmares for the oppressed, resulting in catastrophic lives. This narration evokes profound emotional responses and challenges readers with its intense portrayal of suffering. Mary Cover Jones introduced desensitization, where repeated exposure to aversive stimuli reduces emotional responses, providing therapeutic relief from anxieties and phobias.

In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association formally recognized Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), encompassing symptoms previously identified as shell shock or combat stress. This classification expanded to include trauma responses to events like “rape, child abuse, and other violent occurrences” (Caruth, 1995, p. 3). Trauma narratives in literature foster societal empathy, highlighting “disenfranchised pain and grief” that often lies outside social recognition. This study explores the trauma of minority groups in contemporary literature, examining narrative as a tool for healing and resistance, specifically in the context of Kashmiri experiences.

In “The Collaborator”, Mirza Waheed intricately weaves a narrative of psychological trauma, capturing the protagonist’s internal battles within a landscape marred by conflict. Waheed examines the effects of both direct and indirect trauma, illustrating how constant exposure to violence and loss profoundly impacts the human psyche (Shakoor & Waheed, 2016). As the narrator bleakly remarks, “They just drop off the ridge like dolls...one after the other, ping, ping...Look, they are just dead meat and that’s how I prefer them...a long window...covered with thick curtains, military blankets perhaps, so you can’t see what’s behind the office” (Waheed, 2011, pp. 4-5).

The protagonist’s trauma frequently surfaces through flashbacks to a life before the upheaval, where memories triggered by mundane experiences sharply contrast with his grim present, intensifying his yearning for a return to normalcy (Batool, Younus & Ahsan, 2020). His existential struggle is compounded by his forced role as a collaborator, for which he receives “Five hundred per trip and a small bonus for every ID and weapon [he brings] back.” For the Indian soldiers, “the money’s good, bloody good” (Waheed, 2011, p. 4). The Indian forces manipulate public perception, attempting to obscure the brutal reality in Kashmir and presenting only what serves their agenda, symbolized in the novel by curtains that conceal their actions. The protagonist’s deepening isolation emerges as he questions, “Why me?... when everyone fled for their safety,” and recalls the relentless shelling “day and night during the crackdown.” Reflecting on the loss of “all my friends,” he voices his uncertainty about their fate, admitting, “God only knows if they will ever come back” (Waheed, 2011, pp. 6-7).

The protagonist copes with his painful reality by emotionally detaching from it, a common response to chronic trauma. This dissociation becomes a psychological defense, enabling him to perform his grim duties without succumbing entirely to despair. As Ghosh (2018) observes, dissociation in conflict zones acts as a protective shield, enabling survival amidst relentless trauma. Living under constant threat instills in the protagonist a sense of hyper-vigilance, making him perpetually wary of potential danger. His role as a collaborator exacerbates this anxiety, as he must always be alert, a condition that reflects the profound insecurity and instability of his existence (Akther & Gul, 2022). The protagonist’s isolation and loneliness foster a fragile hope that “people would surely be back at some point” (Waheed, 2011, p. 6). This pervasive sense of abandonment drives him toward daydreams, nearly fanatic. His trauma is further amplified by forced displacement and the chilling slogan of the Indian forces— “catch and kill. Catch and kill”—which he finds both devastating and inhumane (Waheed, 2011, p. 7). The empty valley around him constantly brings memories of better times and his friends, contrasting starkly with the gruesome reality he faces. He describes the valley littered with horrors: “bare wounds, holes dark and visceral,” along with “limbless, armless, even headless, torsos.” The atmosphere is filled with a “lone moan [that] struggles” and the haunting sight of “bodies after bodies—some huddled together, others forlorn and lonesome—in various stages of decay.” The lifeless remains are “like cracked toys,” accompanied by “macabre, horrid ghouls... watch[ing] me from their melancholic

black hole eye sockets.” In the midst of it all, he clings to the hope, “I hope I don’t recognize anyone.” Overwhelmed by the foul odor, he admits, “The smell, the smell, the smell! ... You just stop breathing. That is it” (Waheed, 2011, p. 8).

The protagonist’s forced collaboration with the Indian army thrusts him into a moral quagmire. His interactions with the military and his role in handling the personal effects of deceased militants deepen his internal conflict. This situation creates moral distress, with guilt and self-loathing surfacing as he struggles between his ethical values and his imposed responsibilities (Amrita, 2018). Although fictional, passages like the one mentioned here reveal the brutal treatment inflicted on rural Kashmiri boys during military interrogations (Singh & Rawat, 2021). The novelist says, “He was made to pee on an electric heater while they threw ice-cold water over him; they pierced a red-hot knitting needle through his penis and then gave him electric shocks; they stuffed a bamboo cane with hot chili powder and thrust it up to his anus and then broke the cane; they made him drink their collective urine after keeping him thirsty for days; they ran a cricket roller over his feet and knees... no, they let loose their big dogs on him and that was the point when he broke, for he had always been scared of dogs” (Waheed 2011, p. 186).

As friends join the insurgency and his community distances itself, the protagonist faces deep isolation. This loneliness is not merely physical but also psychological, stemming from the belief that no one can fully comprehend his internal turmoil. This isolation underscores the social fragmentation prevalent in Kashmir’s conflict zones, where community ties erode under political pressures (Zutshi, 2017).

The protagonist is consumed by grief, mourning both personal losses and the broader loss of innocence within his community. The landscapes around him, once alive with memories, now starkly remind him of a past irreversibly changed by violence. Through these settings, Waheed emphasizes the collective mourning shared by those impacted by war (Kak, 2011). The soldiers, indifferent to the suffering around them, take satisfaction in exploiting and tormenting the Kashmiri people. The protagonist describes them as “rabid man-eating wolves” (Waheed, 2011, p. 16), highlighting their brutality and the precision with which they tear apart bodies. He reflects on the desolation of his village, lamenting, “All the boys...are gone, gone, no one left in the village, it’s empty now, all empty! It’s all happening, dear, happening everywhere.” He recalls the disappearance of “sixteen boys (some said twenty, some thirty),” which occurred shortly after a brutal night-long raid during which all the local women “had been raped... by Indian soldiers” (Waheed, 2011, p. 24).

Amidst the relentless trauma, the protagonist occasionally finds solace in brief moments of hope. These glimmers, whether in nature, the laughter of children, or stories shared by elders, offer him a reprieve and reflect the resilience of Kashmir’s people (Kaplan, 2012). Yet, the oppressive surroundings—marked by constant crackdowns and an endless, frigid conflict—leave the characters traumatized, anxious, and indecisive. This inner turmoil is starkly portrayed in the

protagonist's struggle with a fractured identity. He describes his only decisive act as setting a massive fire: "Boys – they all burn in the big fire I've cooked up, the fire I watch now, my fire, my only act, my only decision in years, my fire." As the flames engulf everything, he watches them "leap out from limbs and groins and heads and backs and chests and faces and faces and hands, and everything burns; the feet burn too, those lonely dismembered feet in their boots." This act, for him, obliterates "all that ever was there," leaving behind only the haunting "dark eyes of eternal sleep!" (Waheed, 2011, pp. 298-299).

Beyond immediate trauma, the protagonist faces an existential crisis, torn between insurgency and forced collaboration. This internal struggle leads him to question his place in a changed Kashmir, causing a fractured sense of self and intensifying his psychological turmoil. His crisis mirrors the existential challenges faced by many whose identities and lives are deeply impacted by conflict (Bose, 2003). Waheed's narrative captures this profound disorientation through the protagonist's observations: "It was like a mourning procession... People were dying everywhere, getting massacred in every town and village, people were being picked up and thrown into dark jails in unknown parts, there were dungeons in the city where hundreds of young men were kept in heavy chains and from where many never emerged alive." The grim reality of "thousands who had disappeared, leaving behind women with photographs and perennial waiting," is compounded by the haunting sight of "multitudes of dead bodies on the roads...scattered casually on the snow of mindless borders." For the protagonist, "a little village exodus" is rendered insignificant when "compared to all that" (Waheed, 2011, p. 250). Through these layers, Waheed's narrative comprehensively examines the human cost of conflict, illustrating both the scars left by relentless trauma and the resilience that sustains the human spirit in the face of despair (Shakoor & Waheed, 2016).

Alongside the traumatic present and haunting memories, the protagonist contends with a persistent fear of the future. This fear stems from uncertainty—whether the conflict will ever end or if he will live to see a peaceful Kashmir. Such unpredictability deepens his anxiety and despair (Schofield, 2000). His role as a collaborator further complicates his emotional turmoil, fueling feelings of betrayal. He senses he is betraying his community's hopes, while simultaneously fearing betrayal from those he is compelled to work with. This duality of treachery amplifies his inner conflict, leaving him entangled in a web of loyalty and mistrust (Nageen Rather, 2017).

6. Moral Ambiguities in Times of War

In the complex landscape of conflict, clear distinctions between right and wrong often blur into a spectrum of grey, leading to profound moral ambiguities. This is particularly true for individuals ensnared in war, where survival itself may be perceived as a betrayal.

The lines between survival and betrayal are almost impossible to spot in high-stakes war zones. Just as the drive to do everything in our power to survive — and

to take actions that can help protect ourselves and our friends and family — is as primitive as it gets, the decisions that does involve made in conditions of terrible pressure — often seem ominous to peers and the wider community. This murky moral landscape is exemplified in the protagonist as collaborator in “The Collaborator”, where every act of survival is measured against one’s imputed loyalty to the greater project of Kashmir’s struggle (Batoool, Younus & Ahsan, 2020). His situation, being thrust into the role of police officer, compels him to face up to options which are designed to keep him safe and distant from his fellow countrymen, leaving him in a moral grey area (Ghosh 2018).

Central focus of “The Collaborator” remains the interior battle, the day-to-day decisions haunted by moral dilemmas of the protagonist. The acts he executes to stay alive, such as scavenging belongings from dead militants, eat away at his soul because they represent a dichotomy between his core values and what is expected of him. Each chore acts as a reminder of the dissonance that exists between what he values and the prevailing darkness, which he must constantly fight against, guilty and insecure (Shakoor & Waheed, 2016). This internal struggle, further, illustrates the natural psychological consequence of war, that even survival comes laced with guilt, which takes its toll on the soul (Amrita, 2018).

The ethical quandaries of the protagonist are the same type of moral morass that have long defined war zones, where all sides become entrenched in the righteousness of their cause and morality becomes a muddy gray area. Behavior that is regarded as atrocious in peace is legitimized as strategies for survival in war, writing themselves into the history books and the national society. This has wider consequences, influencing not only individual identifications, but also collective understandings of the past, and generational ideas about virtue (Kaplan, 2012; Kak, 2011).

The psychological scars left by these moral compromises extend beyond individual lives, impacting entire societies forced to rationalize difficult choices made in times of war (Schofield, 2000).

In “The Collaborator”, Waheed portrays the cost of war as more than just physical casualties. Through the protagonist’s journey, the novel highlights the lasting impact of moral compromises, reflecting how war inflicts scars on the human psyche that persist long after the physical battles have ceased (Zutshi, 2017). This portrayal of moral ambiguity highlights the toll of conflict on human values, leaving individuals and communities grappling with the heavy burden of choices shaped by survival rather than principle.

7. Lived Trauma and Sociocultural Disruption in “The Collaborator”

Mirza Waheed’s “The Collaborator” presents a landscape where loss, disrupted daily life, and sociocultural erosion converge into a continuous cycle of trauma. Through the lens of Traumatic Narratology, Desensitization Theory, and trauma constructs such as intrusion, hyperarousal, dissociation, and moral injury, Waheed depicts a community caught in the psychological and cultural fallout of militarized

occupation. The following merged analysis illustrates how these interrelated dimensions collectively reveal the pervasive human cost of the Kashmir conflict.

7.1 The Omnipresence of Loss: Personal Grief, Collective Trauma

Loss permeates “The Collaborator” not as an isolated theme but as an overarching condition that shapes individual and communal consciousness. Waheed’s narrative intertwines personal tragedies with collective mourning, demonstrating how prolonged conflict produces cumulative trauma that corrodes emotional resilience (Shakoor & Waheed, 2016). The desecration of religious sites, violations of sacred spaces, and the humiliating treatment of civilians by military personnel intensify psychological injury, triggering what Herman (1997) terms hyperarousal—a persistent state of fear, humiliation, and anticipatory grief.

The protagonist becomes an emblem of involuntary witnessing: tasked with identifying the belongings of fallen militants, he experiences intrusion through recurring images of death and bodily ruin (Ghosh, 2018). This form of forced proximity to violence parallels real accounts from Kashmiri families coping with the disappearance of loved ones (Kanjwal, 2018), reinforcing the novel’s fidelity to lived experience.

Loss also acquires a spatial and symbolic resonance. Once vibrant public spaces become “haunted geographies,” marked by the absence of youth and the silent testimonies of grief (Bose, 2003). The landscape itself becomes a repository of communal memory, embodying the weight of severed relationships and unspoken sorrow (Fazili, 2017).

By portraying loss as both intimate and collective, Waheed situates trauma not only within individual psyches but within the communal fabric of Kashmir. This contributes directly to the study’s aim of examining how fictional narratives represent the human cost of conflict through psychologically grounded depictions of trauma.

7.2 The Siege of Everyday Life: Disruption, Fear, and Moral Injury

Waheed’s narrative illustrates how conflict infiltrates the mundane, transforming ordinary routines into perilous acts. Activities associated with normalcy—fetching water, attending school, visiting markets—become laden with danger, mirroring ethnographic accounts of life in militarized Kashmir (Duschinski, 2010). Such disruption produces a state of perpetual vigilance and environmental hyperarousal, where individuals navigate daily uncertainty and continuous surveillance.

The village, once a site of communal harmony, becomes emblematic of what Caruth (1996) calls narrative fragmentation: a community forced into living through scattered, interrupted moments of existence. Empty homes, abandoned fields, and fractured agricultural rhythms symbolize the psychological disarray of a population negotiating the thin boundary between survival and collapse (Fazili, 2017; Kaul, 2016).

Despite these pressures, attempts to maintain normality—shared meals, children's play, ritual gatherings—reflect a form of resistant resilience, though always overshadowed by the constant threat of violence (Khan, 2018). Waheed's subtle use of dark humor underscores this duality, capturing how communities internally negotiate despair while clinging to hope (Misri, 2014).

This section highlights how the militarized siege of daily life produces chronic psychological stress and moral injury. The destruction of routine and normalcy reinforces the study's broader argument: that conflict reshapes not only individual identities but the fundamental rhythms of communal life.

7.3 Sociocultural Ramifications: Erosion of Identity, Trust, and Intergenerational Continuity

Beyond individual suffering, "The Collaborator" foregrounds the sociocultural consequences of prolonged militarization. Kashmir's cultural landscape—its festivals, artisanal crafts, communal traditions—is shown to be eroding under the pressure of displacement, fear, and disrupted livelihoods (Kabir, 2009; Bhan, 2013). This decline represents not simply cultural loss but the fracturing of collective identity, a core aspect of trauma's sociological dimension.

Conflict realigns social roles and expectations. Women, traditionally confined to domestic spheres, assume expanded responsibilities in contexts of male disappearance, death, or imprisonment (Sharma & Misri, 2020). Men, especially youth, confront limited choices—militancy, informant networks, or forced withdrawal—illustrating the interplay between coercion and survival (Ali, 2018). These role shifts reflect patterns of identity dislocation common in long-term conflict zones.

A climate of mistrust permeates the community, severing neighborly bonds and dissolving the social cohesion that once characterized Kashmiri life (Hall, 2009). Intergenerational tensions deepen as older generations recall a pluralistic past, while younger ones know only violence, polarization, and absence (Kaul, 2011; Duschinski, 2010). The interruption of cultural memory creates fractures in identity formation, pushing communities toward fragmentation (Bose, 2012).

By depicting sociocultural disintegration—erosion of tradition, shifts in gendered roles, and intergenerational rifts—Waheed demonstrates how trauma extends beyond bodily and emotional suffering to reshape cultural identity itself. This aligns with the research aim by showing how literature can illuminate the multilayered sociocultural dynamics of conflict-induced trauma.

8. The Dissonance of Displacement

"The Collaborator" by Mirza Waheed is a spare depiction of displacement and its effects on personal and collective identity. Located in the stand-off over Kashmir, the novel evokes alienation, loss, and the challenge of identity in the face of massive disruption (Bose, 2012).

At its heart, the story is a tender look at what can truly be called ‘home’. Is it the place where we live, the land of our ancestors or an intangible sense of connection and rootedness? In “The Collaborator”, the people of Kashmir wrestle with these most elemental existential questions as their embattled country moves ever closer toward the abyss. Most characters suffer from home as a site of traumatic memories, where recollections of a happier past collide with harsh modern realities, making them feel dislocated, even within the familiarity of a home (Kaul, 2011). In conflict zones such as Kashmir, Kabir (2009) contends the very idea of home as defined by the sites that represented security and heritage now have been indelibly associated with violence and anxiety. Displacement in the novel comes in both physical and emotional forms. Describes how uprootedness in what remains one's country of residence gives rise to a distinct psychological tension that requires individuals to come to terms with a broken sense of belonging as they remain in known but changed locales (Butalia 2017). Duschinski (2010) further discusses this aspect, pointing out how internal displacement generates a general loss of control and estrangement.

For the characters exploring the war-stricken terrain of Kashmir, there's an identity crisis at large. Who are they in the midst of the chaos, and how do they navigate those broken realities? Religion, profession, community—all the traditional sources of identity come under unrelenting siege as war's brutal facts take hold. Some, do retain their traditional culture, while others modify or reconstruct their identity to suit their new situation (Ali, 2018). Displacement A focus on displacement acknowledges that, for those who experience it, it often leads to a need to (re)construct self-identities (Sharma and Misri, 2020) as a survival strategy. Whether forced out of their homes or the city they once knew, the people of Jagti have largely gathered here in the camps, rented out apartments, schools, guest houses or elsewhere.⁵⁸ This characterization by Waheed displays something of the irrepressibility of the human spirit, how an individual and a people have a way of picking themselves up and laying claim to identity even when dislocated (Sikand, 2001).

In “The Collaborator”, Waheed examines displacement as something deeper than mere absence. It is a profound dislocation of identity, of belonging, of cultural memory. The book points out that when geography is disjointed one loses the physical connection to one's roots; internally disjointment causes an emotional and mental shift in personal identity. The narrative tension mirrors the larger story of many Kashmiris themselves, learning to cross a changed landscape with remnant pillars of identity assailed by constant jolt (Bhan, 2013).

9. The Silent Testimony of Kashmir's Landscape

In “The Collaborator”, Mirza Waheed subtly yet powerfully employs the pristine landscape of Kashmir, not merely as a backdrop, but as a silent witness to the years of turmoil, violence, and heartache. The verdant valleys, meandering rivers, and majestic mountains stand in stark contrast to the human strife unfolding within them,

creating a poignant juxtaposition that underscores the tragedy of the conflict (Kabir, 2009).

Throughout the novel, Kashmir's natural landscape is often personified, acting as a mute spectator to the horrors humans inflict upon one another. Mountains, forests, and rivers serve as silent repositories of memories, bearing witness to countless tales of loss, love, and longing. The landscape represents Kashmir's eternal, unchanging nature, a symbol of resilience amidst the chaos of human conflict (Butalia, 2017). Kabir (2009) notes that Kashmir's landscape, often romanticized in literature and art, serves as a metaphor for the enduring spirit of the region, resilient yet scarred by the tragedy it witnesses. Duschinski (2010) describes how landscapes in conflict zones like Kashmir often carry the weight of historical trauma, becoming silent testaments to the events that shape a community's collective memory.

One of the most haunting aspects of "The Collaborator" is the contrast between Kashmir's breathtaking beauty and the brutal violence permeating its daily life. This juxtaposition serves to amplify the tragedy, highlighting the incongruity of horrors occurring in what is often deemed 'paradise on earth.' The meadows where children once played become graveyards, and the lakes, once tranquil, reflect not only the skies but also the fires of destruction (Fazili, 2017). Kaul (2011) discusses how the juxtaposition of Kashmir's serene beauty with its violent history creates a 'paradise lost' effect, intensifying the emotional weight of the conflict and symbolizing the disruption of peace and innocence in the region. This dissonance in Waheed's narrative lends a layer of melancholy to the story, underscoring the sorrow of a paradise transformed by conflict.

Beyond the human toll, prolonged conflict invariably impacts the environment. "The Collaborator" touches upon the environmental degradation caused by military operations, encampments, and the neglect stemming from prolonged turmoil. Forests are felled, water sources polluted, and wildlife displaced, leading to long-term ecological damage. Kabir (2009) observes that military encroachment in Kashmir has significantly disrupted ecosystems, impacting both the human population and the region's distinctive flora and fauna that contribute to its natural beauty. Sharma and Misri (2020) highlight the environmental consequences of prolonged conflict in Kashmir, emphasizing that the scars of war extend beyond human populations to the natural world, which sustains them.

Through "The Collaborator", Waheed paints a haunting picture of Kashmir's landscape, transforming it into a silent testament to conflict. The natural world, which endures amidst human strife, underscores the stark dissonance between beauty and brutality in a land known as 'paradise on earth' (Ali, 2018). This portrayal of Kashmir's landscape serves as a reminder that the costs of war extend beyond human lives, encompassing the environment that sustains them (Sikand, 2001).

10. Comparative Analysis

War literature has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting the complexities of human conflicts. Classics like Erich Maria Remarque's "All Quiet on the Western Front (1929)" and Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried (1990)" look into the inner and outer landscapes of war, paralleling "The Collaborator" in their exploration of the individual's experience within larger conflicts. While each work emerges from unique geographical and historical contexts, they share a core focus on the psychological and emotional toll of war on both individuals and communities. Waheed's novel, however, stands out by shedding light on the Kashmir conflict, an often-overlooked yet deeply impactful struggle, offering readers a fresh perspective within the global tapestry of war literature (Kabir, 2009).

Certain themes resonate universally across war literature. The horrors of war, moral ambiguities, the loss of innocence, and the profound societal transformations catalyzed by conflict are recurring motifs. For instance, Joseph Heller's "Catch-22 (1961)" and Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five (1969)" address the absurdities and paradoxes of war, while Khaled Hosseini's "A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007)" explores the personal and familial costs of conflict in Afghanistan. Similarly, "The Collaborator", while grounded in the unique context of Kashmir, resonates with these broader themes, emphasizing the universality of human experiences under the pressures of war (Bose, 2012). Fazili (2017) argues that "The Collaborator", like many of these seminal works, invites readers to understand the complexities of war, not just through factual recounting but through deeply personal stories that highlight the absurdity and tragedy of conflict.

This universality underscores a shared human experience that transcends geographic, cultural, and historical boundaries (Kaul, 2011). Sikand (2001) highlights how political struggles globally elicit similar patterns of loss, resilience, and adaptation, with "The Collaborator" serving as a poignant reminder of the heavy human cost borne by individuals amidst political turmoil. Through Waheed's lens, "The Collaborator" not only tells the story of Kashmir but connects with readers worldwide, emphasizing the necessity for empathy, understanding, and, ultimately, peace (Butalia, 2017). This universality of the human cost reminds us that beyond numbers and statistics lie individual stories of survival, shattered dreams, and a resilience that endures even in the face of overwhelming adversity (Duschinski, 2010).

11. Conclusion

Mirza Waheed's "The Collaborator": Behind the story of collaboration lies a powerful narrative, a cauldron filled with all that which adds up to make human experience come alive in adversity. The novel creates a multilayered narrative about the unnamed protagonist and extracts his emotions in Kashmir viewed through various angles related to geopolitical conflict using Kashmir as both the backdrop and a living element — an occupational memory, loss of home and at once a silent rebellion (Kabir, 2009). While "The Collaborator" unflinchingly transmits the

emotional pain of loss and evokes moral ambiguity about what it is to survive, war itself serves as a battleground that plays out less on physical terrain than in psychological, affective response (Duschinski, 2010).

During an era of global tumult and great division, “The Collaborator” still greatly resonates. Dealing with loss, displacement, moral ambiguity and identity it is relevant to our times providing a reminder for today's audiences that behind political headlines and rhetoric there are very real human stories. The way borders become battlegrounds and ideologies collide, the novel reminds us that there are always some entities programmed to destroy an individual as their life takes a shift due to these grand phenomena (Kaul, 2011). Waheed's narrative, Khan (2018) argues using Kant and Martha Nussbaum, serves as a mirror for the enduring legacies of geopolitical conflicts that magnify humanity today pawing at our windows in an interconnected world where empathy compassion dialogue remains critical. This aspect of the book remains as relevant and compelling today, calling readers to have a voice in their world with eyes towards unifying together against those things that try and separate us from each other (Pandita 2013).

The theme of resilience is as old — and universal, in literature and history. These leitmotifs in Kashmiri oral tradition to this day, as Bose (2012) has noted of a story such as “The Collaborator” demonstrate the sheer resilience naturalized into those living under perpetual conflict. Waheed's novel turns it into a testament to the humankind ability of searching for hope in desolation, staying alive and eventually starting over (Sharma & Misri, 2020). While exploring the realms of pain and survival, “The Collaborator” points towards the strength in endurance as a human spirit — it can survive this long due to its ability to bear with things now changing at an increased pace but also capable of looking beyond current reality.

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Conflict of interest

There is no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work, as declared by the authors. In addition, the authors have witnessed all ethical concerns, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publishing and/or submission, and redundancy.

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