





# MANIFESTATION OF INSIDIOUS TRAUMA IN KAMILA SHAMSIE'S *IN THE CITY BY THE SEA*

Vinay Yadav <sup>1</sup>  , Dr. Jitender Singh <sup>2</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana, India - 124001

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hindu College, Sonipat, Haryana, India – 131001



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## Corresponding Author

Vinay Yadav,  
[vinayyadav0700@gmail.com](mailto:vinayyadav0700@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the manifestation of insidious trauma in Kamila Shamsie's debut novel, *In the City by the Sea*. Unlike overt traumatic experiences, insidious trauma operates subtly through systematic oppression, cultural silencing, and inherited fear. Set against the backdrop of political unrest in Pakistan, the novel traces down the young protagonist Hasan's psychological journey and the portrayal of his family dynamics to expose how political violence permeates everyday life and affects individual consciousness. By analysing narrative representation, hidden layers, and the intergenerational transmission of anxiety, the paper reveals Shamsie's crafts as a powerful critique of authoritarianism. This study draws theoretical framework from critics like Maria Root and Laura S Brown's socio-political and cultural theory to explore the hidden traces of trauma emerging from discrimination and exploitation. Hence, the study positions insidious trauma as a lens to understand the invisible scars that haunt societies long after the events themselves.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Insidious Trauma, Kamila Shamsie, Theory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Maria P. Root coined the term and defined insidious trauma as trauma that arises from "the social devaluation of one's identity" (232), especially in contexts of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. She emphasizes that this trauma is often invisible. Laura S. Brown, another pioneer in feminist trauma theory, states that "Insidious trauma is the cumulative effect of oppression, where the trauma is not in what happens, but in what is denied – voice, agency, and recognition" (107). Janani KS and Dr Manali Karmakar argue that "The paradigm of Insidious Trauma provides scope to discuss mundane and everyday experientialities of trauma that

result from socially marginalized positions" (384). Judith Herman, in her foundational work *Trauma and Recovery*, while not using the term directly, describes how trauma can be embedded in everyday life through "the calm façade that masks the wound," (Herman 45) especially in environments where speaking out is unsafe. Therefore, Insidious Trauma refers to the psychological harm caused by chronic exposure to systematic oppression, marginalization, and cultural silencing, rather than by a single catastrophic event. This kind of trauma is mainly associated with minority groups like children, women, and racially discriminated people of post-colonial times. To understand this trauma through the lens of literature, it is essential to search for the subtle disruptions, silences, ruptured thoughts and memories, and internal conflict of the characters because it does not stem from a single event but from continuous exposure to systematic oppression, cultural silencing, and inherited fear.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kamila Shamsie is a British-Pakistani writer whose characters experience trauma by exploring the theme of identity, history, politics, and displacement in a post-colonial world. Her fiction often blends personal stories with broader socio-political contexts. Her narratives are set against the backdrop of historical ruptures like Partition and displacement where characters have to deal with personal loss, identity crises, and emotional fragmentation. These narratives often feature elements that are central to trauma like subtle silencing, internalized shame, and ambient fear. For the present study, Shamsie's debut novel, *In the City by the Sea* (1998), has been taken up to study latent elements of insidious trauma in postcolonial socio-political environment. Since its publication, this novel has garnered scholarly attention for its nuanced portrayal of political repression, childhood trauma, and the imaginative resilience of youth. Bimal Prasad Chapagain, in his thesis titled "Representation of Trauma in Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea*" examines collective trauma under military rule. His study focuses on Salman's arrest and Hasan's Psychological response to it. Whereas, Premalatha et al. in their paper titled "Psycho-social Analysis on Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea*" utilize Erikson's developmental stages to analyse Hasan's emotional growth and identity formation. On the other hand, Saleem et al. in their paper titled "A Metahistorical study of Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* (1980)" apply Hayden White and Richard Slotkin's theories to argue that historical fiction offers a more empathetic critique of political history than historiography. Nawaz et al. in their paper titled "Environmental Consciousness: An Ecocritical Study of Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea*" highlight the environmental degradation linking it with trauma and its symbolic impact on Hasan's mental state. M N Gaana, in her paper titled "*In the City by the Sea*: A Tale of Sadness, Loss, and Political Instability", reflects on the authoritarian regime of General Zia-Ul-Haq and highlights the silencing of dissent and the erosion of democratic ideals. Hasan's retreat into fantasy serves as a coping mechanism and illustrates the transformative power of imagination.

## 3. RESEARCH GAP

While existing literature on *In the City by the Sea* has explored collective trauma, psychosocial development, and political repression, it often foregrounds overt and event-based suffering. However, a research gap emerges in addressing insidious trauma which is the subtle and cumulative psychological harm caused by prolonged exposure to systemic oppression, silencing, and everyday authoritarianism. Unlike acute trauma, insidious trauma operates through ambient fear and internalized

helplessness which remain underexplored in Hasan's narrative arc. Hence, investigating this dimension could reveal how trauma is embedded not just in dramatic events but in the very texture of daily life under dictatorship. Therefore, this paper scrutinises Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* to foreground certain valuable insights that can enhance the understanding of insidious trauma. The study unveils the sustained exposure to authoritarian rule through surveillance, silencing, and ambient fear that shapes the psyche of a young boy, Hasan. His world is shattered not in a single moment, instead it erodes gradually through subtle emotional upheavals. Hence, the research focuses on Shamsie's storytelling that captures the essence of insidious trauma. It is embedded not in explosive events but in the unnoticed rituals of everyday life under oppression.

#### 4. ANALYSIS

Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* is an important source for analysing the complexities of insidious trauma from the perspective of marginalised groups – mainly women and children. This novel clearly depicts the overt political trauma due to political repression in Karachi city. But the insidious trauma experienced by children and women characters is less overt and subtle. The protagonist, Hasan, is an 11-year-old emotionally sensitive boy who experiences incidents of authoritarian repression and familial breakdown, which snatched his innocence and altered his imagination. He witnessed the death of a cousin who fell from the rooftop while trying to save a kite. This incident has stripped away Hasan's innocence and instilled a fear of death in his thoughts about kites, "Overhead, a kite fluttered into view. Hasan rolled over and buried his face in the pine-cones" (16). He revisits the moment of his death, "The time it took him to fall from roof to ground seemed an eternity, longer and longer each time Hasan replayed it in his mind; so long it seemed that if Hasan had just tried, just jumped and run with arms outstretched he could have caught the boy before . . ." (47). Revisiting the scene of Azeem's fall instils a sense of guilt in Hasan, causing him to become self-conscious and question the world around him. He grapples with feelings of inadequacy, wondering why he was unable to save Azeem or ask for help. Hasan's inner transformation centers around Azeem, particularly when he confesses to himself... "Azeem's fall had been the most unfathomable thing in his life: the mood which allowed memory without pain" (148). He feels responsible for Azeem's death and begins to find fault in himself. When his mother finally questions him about what he witnessed that day, he breaks down and reveals, "Maybe he was doing it, getting so involved in making the kite fly, because he knew I was watching" (198). Hasan believes that his presence on the roof that day contributed to Azeem's fall while trying to showcase his kite-flying skills. This hidden aspect of Hasan's mindset reveals the deep trouble he feels whenever he thinks of Azeem, holding himself responsible for being there and not intervening to save him. His unresolved trauma remains buried within him without any resolution until the end.

The arrest of his beloved uncle shatters Hasan's world which results in a profound silence among the adults around him. The once-vibrant atmosphere of his home has turned uneasy. It is replaced by whispered conversations and furtive glances that diminish feelings of warmth and trust. At the core of Hasan's trauma is the erasure of his sense of safety and stability as if the familiar rhythms of his life collapse around him. The narrator illustrates "That night, in the stillness of the bedroom, Hasan felt as though he was surrounded. People in uniform watching him, listening to every breath, wondering why he was not asleep" (19). Before the political crisis, Hasan inhabited a world rich in creativity and imagination. His

unique ability to engage in conversations with inanimate objects and envision alternate realities provided both charm and a psychological refuge. However, as the political turmoil intensified following Salman Haq's arrest, these imaginative faculties took on a darker shade. Hasan sought solace in his fantasies not merely for amusement but as a means of protecting himself from the pervasive anxiety that filled his surroundings. Shamsie writes, "Hasan shivered and turned away. He never knew, these days, what tossed-off comment could destroy the equilibrium of his mood and leave him scrambling for ideas, images, poems, even multiplication tables to fill up his mind" (136). His internal world becomes increasingly filled with fear, surveillance, and uncertainty which mirrors the real external collapse of his family stability. Through this portrayal, Shamsie illustrates how trauma in children often manifests not as obvious symptoms but as a change in their internal narrative logic – a subtle reshaping of how they perceive and understand the world.

Hasan experiences insidious trauma due to indirect exposure to systemic violence. Following Salman Haq's arrest, his household is filled with unspoken grief and anxiety. It creates a culture of silence that serves both as a survival mechanism and a sign of deeper psychological issues. This silence disorients Hasan who feels the disruption but lacks the language and tools to understand it. He becomes increasingly aware of the emotional absences and altered behaviours of the adults around him. It includes his parents' strained communication and his mother's emotional withdrawal which contributes to his confusion and isolation. The trauma is relational and intergenerational that forces Hasan to interpret his reality through whispers and changed emotional dynamics. His trauma is intensified by a lack of open dialogue. It turns everyday interactions into sources of tension and uncertainty. This enforced silence mirrors broader political repression. It also illustrates how trauma infiltrates domestic life and distorts even the closest relationships. In these politically oppressive environments, children often become reluctant inheritors of this silence and absorb the trauma of their elders without having the tools to process or express it.

Hasan's internalization of these ruptures signifies a loss of innocence and an early exposure to politics, yet he lacks the clarity and empowerment that political consciousness can bring to an adult. He finds himself in a liminal space where he is aware that something is profoundly wrong but unable to articulate it fully or receive validation for his fears. This dissonance leads to a persistent low-level anxiety that characterizes insidious trauma. He reflects on the disturbed sleep patterns in his home: "Sleep had, of late, become the great divider in the house. At any moment of the day, someone was asleep, falling asleep, or just waking up, and this more than anything else made these days even stranger than the first days after Salman Mamoo's arrest" (155). As the novel progresses, Hasan's imaginative world becomes less fantastical and increasingly fragmented. It suggests that even his psychological defences are beginning to crumble. His silence, introspection, and emotional sensitivity highlight the emotional toll of state violence on children, particularly those in families directly targeted by political regimes. When it becomes inevitable that Salman Mamoo's life will not be spared, Hasan reflects: "On those days, Hasan understood what Ami had meant when she said that there are memories that cannot be spoken of, because to speak of them imperfectly is to rob them of something vital; though to leave them intact inside is to leave no space for anything else in your life" (205-206).

Thus, Hasan's perspective allows Shamsie to explore how authoritarian violence reverberates through the private corners of life. His experience underscores the often-overlooked emotional labour of children caught in the crossfire of political repression. They may not be direct victims but they serve as

fragile repositories of familial tension, cultural fear, and emotional displacement. His narrative embodies the intimate and subjective suffering that characterizes insidious trauma. It also renders him a profoundly moving and politically charged figure in the novel's exploration of repression and resistance.

Moreover, Shamsie highlights how women often serve as silent bearers of suffering. They have to endure emotional and psychological burdens during political upheaval while remaining largely excluded from discussions of resistance and agency. In contrast to Salman Haq whose arrest makes him a public symbol of defiance, the women in the novel experience quieter, invisible, and gendered forms of trauma that are frequently overlooked or misunderstood. Their suffering does not manifest in dramatic outbursts; instead, it is reflected in their everyday acts of resilience. They must suppress their emotions and maintain familial stability in times of crisis. Shamsie captures mental state of Hasan's mother, " 'Damn my brother,' Ami said, picking up the paper and slapping it down on the table. 'Damn the whole bloody mess.' She cupped her face in her hands and began to cry. Hasan pressed himself against the wall and inched away" (171). This situation positions women as bearers of insidious trauma rooted in gendered expectations of strength, silence, and sacrifice. For example, Hasan's mother navigates a space between emotional fragility and expected resilience. While managing the household, she also serves as an emotional buffer for her child amidst external chaos. Troubled by Salman's arrest and impending trial, she strives to shield Hasan from guilt over Azeem's death. Although not a direct target of state violence, she becomes an emotional casualty, forced to mask her fear and grief to maintain stability for Hasan. This emotional labour highlights how women in patriarchal societies are expected to contain their trauma within the domestic sphere where suffering is normalized and often invisible. As a result, her trauma is not just personal but is shaped by cultural norms that suppress women's voices in expressing their suffering.

The experience of Salman's wife is particularly striking as she is thrust into the precarious position of being married to a political prisoner. Her identity as the wife of a political leader is not highlighted. She does not receive the same level of political attention or recognition that is often awarded to male martyrs or resistors. Instead, her suffering is overshadowed by the narrative of male political heroism yet she is expected to remain strong, loyal, and silent. After her husband's arrest, "Gul Mumani seemed barely aware of what was happening and kept repeating a single phrase over and over. The words disappeared and became a rhythm that was echoed in the throb of her Corolla's engine and the mating call of birds. Tu-whit-to-woo. What will they do?" (69-70). The state violence does not stop with Salman's arrest; it also extends into his household and profoundly impacts the lives of the women he leaves behind. Salman's wife must cope with emotional abandonment, social scrutiny, and a deep sense of helplessness in a world marked with oppression and marginalization. She recalls, "We couldn't understand what's or why's, and neither of us was willing to really talk because if we did we knew the word 'assassination' would pop up. But I was thinking it until my toes curled and wouldn't uncurl, until Salman said, look if they wanted to get rid of me they'd just do it" (72). She has a presage of something suspicious happening against her husband, yet she receives no public acknowledgment or space to express her grief. This type of trauma characterized by erasure and enforced silence exemplifies the gendered nature of insidious trauma where women are recognized only for their ability to endure suffering in silence.

The cumulative effect of gendered suffering becomes more evident when viewed through the lens of domestic repression that mirrors political repression.



Just as the state controls and silences its citizens, patriarchal structures within families and society often expect women to self-regulate their emotions, suppress dissent, and bear the emotional burdens of others. This double bind in which women are both victims of trauma and buffers against it highlights the deeply embedded patriarchal mechanisms that perpetuate insidious trauma. Shamsie does not depict these women as weak or defeated; rather, their resilience is portrayed as tragic because it is something they are compelled to demonstrate rather than a choice they make. Their silence is not a sign of consent but rather an indication of the limited space in which they must navigate. Moreover, the intergenerational nature of trauma is also highly significant. Women like Hasan's mother experience suffering themselves and, inadvertently, pass on the effects of that trauma to their children through emotional withdrawal and unspoken fears. This subtle transmission underscores how trauma can turn into a legacy and influence relationships and psychological landscapes over time. Shamsie does not allow her readers to confine trauma to incidents of public violence alone. She also illustrates how trauma also exists in the hidden corners of the home and can be manifested in women's strained smiles, interrupted sentences, and sleepless nights.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Thus, Shamsie creates a social environment characterized by exclusion, uncertainty, and vulnerability, particularly for those who do not align with the dominant political or ideological structures. In this context, minority identity is defined not just by religion or ethnicity but also by one's position of dissent or deviation from the state's singular vision of nationalism and conformity. Those who question or resist are marginalized and their sense of belonging becomes conditional. This unstable inclusion forms the foundation of insidious trauma for characters living under authoritarian rule. For example, the arrest of Salman Haq sets off a chain of events that highlights the precarious status of individuals perceived as 'other' by the state. Although Salman holds a position of relative privilege, his opposition to the regime quickly strips him of the protection and visibility that once marked him as essential. The arbitrary nature of his arrest sends a chilling message to the public: no one is truly safe if they deviate from the state-sanctioned identity. Hence, Shamsie in this novel highlights a form of trauma that is often invisible, sustained, and strongly linked to gender. By focusing on the experiences of women and children, particularly those in minority or politically vulnerable households, she emphasizes the intimate, personal, and lasting nature of this insidious trauma. The novel critiques how state violence intrudes into the private sphere and silences those who lack a platform for their voices. However, it also allows for moments of quiet resistance by showcasing the enduring power of imagination and memory as vital means of survival.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Therefore, an engaging discussion on Kamila Shamsie's *In the City by the Sea* reveals that trauma can reside not only in explosive events but in the quiet erosion of safety, speech, and emotional expression. Unlike narratives that center on overt violence and dramatic upheaval, Shamsie constructs a psychological terrain where insidious trauma thrives in silence, denial, and emotional erosion. Hasan's fragmented perception reflects a layered narrative that prioritizes internal resistance over external revolt and foregrounds how trauma seeps into everyday life. The novel affirms that literature can bear witness to trauma even when voices are suppressed by turning silence into its own form of resilience. Ultimately, this

research invites a reconsideration of how literature bears witness to trauma when overt storytelling is too dangerous and when emotional truth must be carried between the lines. Through the lens of insidious trauma, Shamsie's novel challenges readers to listen to the silences, to see the invisible scars, and to honour the quiet endurance of those who survive oppression without ever naming it.

## 7. SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a rich potential in juxtaposing Shamsie's portrayal of grief and muted resistance with diasporic voices from similarly politicised backgrounds. Future work might also employ reader-response methods to analyse how the audience interprets silence as a narrative strategy. Translations of the novel across languages could be analysed for how insidious trauma shifts in cultural reception. Moreover, integrating psychological theories on childhood cognition and repression could deepen understanding of Hasan's fragmented awareness. Overall, the novel opens wide avenues for interdisciplinary inquiry into trauma, resilience, and literary form.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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