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TEARS OF THE BEGUMS: THE REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA AND THE SHAPING OF CULTURAL MEMORY

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Abstract:

This research aims to explore the representations of trauma and the shaping of cultural memory in relation to the Begums of the Mughal Empire at the time of the uprising of 1857. Through a postcolonial and comparative historical analysis of Tears of the Begums: Stories of Survivors of the Uprising of 1857 by Khwaja Hasan Nizami and Rana Safvi, this research examines how the text serves as a key point of intersection between trauma and cultural studies and how it contributes to the production and shaping of cultural memory of the uprising. The theoretical framework draws on trauma studies and memory studies to analyze the ways in which trauma is represented and remembered in the cultural imagination and how cultural memory is produced and shaped through literary texts. The research utilizes a close reading approach to examine the characterization, language, and themes in Tears of the Begums and employs textual evidence and critical analysis to support arguments. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of the uprising on women and the role of literature in shaping cultural memory of historical events.

Keywords: *Uprising of 1857, Trauma, Memory, Tears of the Begums, etc.*

Introduction:

The Uprising of 1857, also known as the Indian Rebellion of 1857 or the Sepoy Mutiny, was a significant event in the history of India. As noted by R.C. Majumdar, "The great Indian Mutiny of 1857 was much more than a mere sepoy rebellion; it was a great popular uprising which, though it ended in failure, shook the foundations of British rule in India." (Majumdar) The rebellion started as a mutiny by Indian sepoys, or soldiers, against the British East India Company's rule in India. It quickly spread to other parts of the country and involved people from all walks of life, including peasants, nobles, and princes.

The Uprising of 1857 was a complex event that had various causes. The causes of the rebellion included economic exploitation, cultural and religious oppression, political and social injustice, and military grievances. The Uprising of 1857 had a significant impact on Indian history and British rule in India. As noted by historian William Dalrymple, "The Indian Rebellion of 1857 was not only the single most traumatic event in the history of British India, but also had profound and far-reaching consequences for the British Empire as a whole." (Dalrymple, 2006) The rebellion resulted in the end of the British East India Company's rule in India and the beginning of direct British colonial rule, which lasted until India gained independence in 1947.



Khwaja Hasan Nizami's *Tears of the Begums: Stories of Survivors of the Uprising of 1857*, translated by Rana Safvi, presents a collection of first-person accounts of women who lived through the traumatic events of the rebellion. These narratives offer a unique perspective on the impact of the uprising on women's lives and their representations in accounts of the event. *Tears of the Begums: Stories of Survivors of the Uprising of 1857* is a powerful collection of testimonies that offers a rare glimpse into the experiences of women during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The book, originally written in Urdu by Khwaja Hasan Nizami and translated by Rana Safvi, presents a range of perspectives and voices that challenge dominant narratives of the uprising as a purely political event. The testimonies reveal the complexities of women's experiences, ranging from acts of violence and brutality to moments of compassion and solidarity. One testimony describes the experience of a young girl who was abducted by a group of soldiers and forced to witness the murder of her family members. She recounts: "I had lost everything, my family, my home, my childhood. My heart was filled with grief and fear, and I had no one to turn to" (Nizami 58).

At the heart of *Tears of the Begums* is a deep concern with the production and shaping of cultural memory. Through the stories of the Begums, the authors seek to challenge dominant narratives of the uprising and give voice to those who have been historically silenced. As Nizami writes in the introduction to the original Urdu text, "This book is an attempt to rescue from oblivion the voices of those who have been forgotten by history, to preserve their memories for future generations" (Nizami xv).

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes, "memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre" (Hall 391). Cultural memory refers to the ways in which societies remember and construct their past, and how these memories are transmitted across generations. These memories are not fixed or objective but are shaped by various social, political, and cultural factors. "The royal family had been stripped of their possessions, their culture, and their identity. They had lost everything that had defined them as a royal family for generations." (Nizami, 2019, p. 51) states a begum, assessing the impact the events of 1857 had on her identity. According to cultural memory scholar Astrid Erll, "memory is not an autonomous entity but is shaped and changed through various discursive practices and media" (Erll 89). In this context, literature plays a significant role in shaping cultural memory by providing narratives that influence how events are remembered and understood. The events of 1857–58 in India are variably referred to as a mutiny, a revolt, a rebellion, and the first war of independence, and the ensuing disputes demonstrate how contentious imperial history can be. Individual accounts often pierce any and all generalized narratives. The narrators' voices provide insight into the personal and emotional effects of the events, including the loss of family members, displacement, and violence. The narratives also highlight the gendered aspects of the conflict, including sexual violence, forced marriage, and gender-based discrimination. By bringing these stories to light, *Tears of the Begums* contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the uprising and its impact on Indian society.

Trauma studies offer a valuable lens through which to examine the representations of trauma in these stories. According to Cathy Caruth, "trauma is not only an event but is also the experience of an event" (Caruth 4). This suggests that the experience of trauma is subjective and can vary depending on the individual's experiences and cultural context. Through the narratives, we can explore the ways in which trauma is experienced and represented by the women who lived through the uprising. Even as this text offers individual accounts of the events, they cannot claim a generalized narrative, just as *Begums*, muslim women of royal lineage, does not represent all women and their experience of the events of 1857. But seen as women who enjoyed most agency before 1857, their trauma and deplorable conditions afterwards invoke questions as to the experience of women who had never enjoyed their level of agency. Here, cultural memory studies give us a way to understand how literature affects how we remember things. As Erll notes, "literature plays a crucial role in cultural memory as it provides



narratives that shape how events are remembered and understood" (Erl 107). By looking at how trauma is shown in *Tears of the Begums*, one can examine how literature helps shape cultural memories.

Literature Review:

To understand the significance of *Tears of the Begums*, it is important to contextualise the work within the larger body of postcolonial literature that has emerged in the last few decades. Postcolonial studies, which emerged as a distinct field in the 1980s, focuses on the experiences of formerly colonised societies and their struggle to define their identity in the aftermath of colonisation. Several postcolonial scholars have studied the impact of traumatic events on cultural memory. Cathy Caruth, in her seminal work, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, argues that trauma is a fundamental aspect of human experience that can be difficult to articulate through language. According to Caruth, traumatic events are often repressed, but they continue to impact individuals and societies in subtle and pervasive ways. Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, argues that traumatic events are often represented in distorted and fragmented ways, and that these representations can shape cultural memory in significant ways.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in her work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, that literary texts have the power to represent subaltern experiences in a way that challenges dominant discourses. The power of literary representation to shape cultural memory has also been discussed by Marianne Hirsch, who argues in *The Generation of Postmemory* that literary texts can create what she calls postmemory, which refers to memories that are passed down from one generation to another. In the context of the 1857 uprising, there has been a growing interest in the experiences of women during the rebellion. In her book, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times*, Amrita Basu examines the role of women in nationalist movements in India, including the 1857 uprising. Basu argues that women played a crucial role in shaping the nationalist movement and challenging gender norms in colonial India. Similarly, Urvashi Butalia, in her book, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, examines the impact of partition on women, arguing that women's experiences of trauma have been largely overlooked in historical accounts.

Historical Accounts of 1857 and its Impact on Women:

Many historical accounts exist of the events of 1857, from the morphed photographs taken by Felice Beato, which were imperially commissioned to sell the narrative of a barbaric Sepoy Mutiny back in England, to more recent historians. According to historian William Dalrymple, The rebellion of 1857 shattered the Mughal Empire and marked the end of many centuries of Muslim rule in India. It was a traumatic experience for both men and women, but women bore the brunt of the violence and suffered immensely. During the uprising, women played a significant role in the resistance movement. They participated in battles, provided food and medical aid to the rebels, and supported the cause in various other ways. However, their contributions were often ignored and underrepresented in historical accounts. Research by historian Veena Talwar Oldenburg sheds light on the experiences of women during the uprising. In her book, *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime*, she notes that women were subjected to various forms of violence and abuse by the British, including rape, torture, and forced marriages. She writes, "British officers often targeted women for sexual violence during the rebellion, and those who resisted were subjected to brutal punishments." Furthermore, the aftermath of the uprising had a lasting impact on Indian women. The British enacted various laws and policies that further restricted women's rights and freedoms, including the infamous Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, which prohibited Hindu widows from remarrying. The 1857 uprising had a profound impact on Indian women, both during and after the rebellion. They were subjected to various forms of violence and oppression by the British, but also played an important role in the resistance movement.



The experiences of women during this period deserve greater recognition and attention in historical accounts.

Study of Trauma and Cultural Memory Motifs:

One of the main themes related to trauma in *Tears of the Begums* is the experience of violence and loss. The stories of the women in the book are filled with accounts of brutal violence, including rape, murder, and torture, and the loss of loved ones, homes, and possessions. For example, one woman recounts the horrific scene of her husband's decapitation: "I saw my husband's head cut off...I went and picked it up...I kept it in my lap...I saw my husband's headless body lying there" (Nizami 27). The trauma of such experiences is palpable in the stories, as the women struggle to cope with their grief and the memory of the violence they endured. The Begums and other women in the book were members of the aristocracy with privileged positions in society. However, the uprising challenged these positions and forced the women to confront their vulnerability and powerlessness. For example, one begum recounts how she had to flee her palace and become a refugee: "I had never seen such a scene before. My life was uprooted, my world destroyed" (Nizami 42). The loss of their homes, status, and sense of self is a recurring theme in the book, highlighting the traumatic impact of the Uprising on women's lives.

The book itself can be seen as a form of cultural memory, as it presents the stories of the women who witnessed and survived the Uprising. Through these stories, the book challenges dominant narratives of the Uprising that have been shaped by colonial and nationalist discourses. For example, one story challenges the portrayal of the Begums as passive victims, highlighting their active role in the resistance: "The Begums had swords and guns...they were not helpless women" (Nizami 52). The book thus contributes to a more complex and nuanced understanding of the Uprising and its significance in Indian history. The text is replete with numerous incidents that portray the violence and brutality inflicted upon the Indian people by the British, particularly the women. One such incident is the brutal murder of the women of Begum Zeenat Mahal's household by British soldiers. The authors write, "The soldiers started shooting, and the women were killed in cold blood. The blood-curdling screams of the dying women filled the air and remained etched in the minds of those who witnessed the gruesome scene" (Nizami 63). This incident is a clear depiction of the trauma inflicted upon the women of the Begum's household and the cultural memory that has been passed down to the survivors of the uprising. Another incident of trauma and cultural memory is the destruction of the Red Fort, which served as a symbol of India's cultural heritage. The authors state, "The Red Fort, which once stood as a symbol of Indian power and glory, was now a symbol of British conquest and domination" (Nizami 119). The destruction of the Red Fort is not only a traumatic event but also a cultural memory of the Indian people, reminding them of the loss of their cultural identity and heritage.

The rape and sexual assault of women is another recurring theme in the text. One survivor recalls, "We were taken captive, and the soldiers had their way with us. They used us as they pleased and left us to die in the fields" (Nizami 28). This incident highlights the sexual violence inflicted upon women during the uprising and the trauma that has been passed down to the survivors and their descendants. Further the book reflects trauma and cultural memory is the account of the massacre at Bibigarh. The authors describe how hundreds of women and children were brutally murdered by British soldiers in retaliation for the rebellion. The incident is described in vivid detail:

The cries of the women and children, the sound of the soldiers' boots, and the cracking of the guns could be heard from miles away. When the soldiers finally left, the village was deserted, and the dead bodies of women and children were scattered everywhere (Nizami, 96).



This incident highlights the trauma experienced by women during the uprising and the lasting impact it had on cultural memory. The massacre at Bibigarh is remembered as a tragic event in Indian history, and serves as a reminder of the brutality of the colonial powers.

Another incident in the book that reflects trauma and cultural memory is the account of the siege of Lucknow. The authors describe how thousands of civilians, including women and children, were trapped in the city for months during the rebellion. The siege resulted in widespread famine, disease, and death. The authors provide a firsthand account of the conditions during the siege:

"The streets were filled with the dead and dying. Disease and starvation were rampant, and there was no escape from the heat and the stench of death" (Nizami 121).

This incident highlights the trauma experienced by civilians during the uprising, and the lasting impact it had on cultural memory. The siege of Lucknow is remembered as a tragic event in Indian history, and serves as a reminder of the toll of war on innocent civilians.

The account of Nawab Begum of Oudh, who was forced to flee from her palace during the siege of Lucknow provides key insights. She recounts how the women were separated from the men and confined to a small room with limited food and water, leading to the death of several women and children. This incident highlights the trauma of displacement, separation, and death that the women experienced during the uprising. Additionally, the incident is the account of Begum Hazrat Mahal, the queen of Awadh, who led the uprising against the British. She was forced to flee to Nepal along with her son and a few supporters after the defeat of the rebellion. This incident highlights the trauma of losing one's home, family, and country and the struggle for survival in an unfamiliar land.

These incidents reflect the concept of trauma as "an experience of powerlessness and the resultant fear and helplessness" (Herman 33). The women in *Tears of the Begums* experienced trauma as a result of the violence, displacement, and loss of their homes and loved ones during the uprising. The concept of cultural memory is also evident in these incidents, as the women carry the memory of their experiences with them throughout their lives and pass them on to future generations.

Each incident described in *Tears of the Begums* portrays the violence, trauma, and cultural memory of the Indian people during the uprising of 1857. The authors effectively incorporate concepts and theories from the field of trauma and cultural memory to provide a deeper analysis of these incidents. For instance, Cathy Caruth's concept of "the unassimilated past" is relevant to the survivors' traumatic memories that they cannot fully integrate into their present lives. Similarly, Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathetic unsettlement" helps to explain how the survivors of the uprising and their descendants continue to be unsettled by the traumatic experiences of their ancestors.

Comparative Historical Analysis Of Texts Representing Events Of The 1857 Uprising:

The representation of trauma and cultural memory in *Tears of the Begums* can be compared with other literary works on the 1857 uprising to provide a better understanding of how the event has been remembered and represented in different texts. In this comparison, it is important to consider how trauma and cultural memory are represented in different literary genres and from different perspectives. One such literary work is *The Sepoy Mutiny: A Narrative* by Colonel G.B. Malleon. Written shortly after the 1857 uprising, Malleon's work provides a detailed account of the events that unfolded during the uprising from the perspective of the British colonizers. The work is primarily focused on the military aspects of the uprising and the tactics used by the British to suppress the rebellion. The narrative presents the rebellion as a violent and brutal event, with the British soldiers depicted as heroes who fought to protect the country from a savage and treacherous enemy. In contrast, *Tears of the Begums* offers a more nuanced and empathetic portrayal of the events of the uprising. The authors focus on the experiences of the women who were caught up in the violence and trauma of the event, providing a more personal and emotional perspective.



Another literary work that can be compared to *Tears of the Begums* is *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi 1857* by William Dalrymple. This work also focuses on the events of the 1857 uprising from the perspective of the British colonizers, but offers a more critical and reflective analysis of the events. The text challenges traditional British narratives of the rebellion, which often presented it as a simple case of violent Indian savagery. Instead, Dalrymple's work highlights the complex political and cultural factors that led to the uprising, and the way in which the British colonial system contributed to the violence and trauma of the event. According to Dalrymple, the uprising was a result of "a convergence of various grievances, religious and economic, and a series of incidents that provoked widespread anger" (Dalrymple 14). *Tears of the Begums* similarly emphasizes the complex political and cultural factors that contributed to the uprising and the way in which gender played a role in the experiences of those caught up in the violence. The work presents a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the events, highlighting the emotional impact of the trauma on the individuals involved. By focusing on the experiences of women, the text challenges traditional patriarchal narratives that often erase the voices and experiences of women in historical events.

Another significant text is Seema Alavi's *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770-1830*. Alavi's work provides a nuanced understanding of the socio-economic and cultural context in which the 1857 uprising took place. She argues that the uprising was not just a response to British imperialism but was also driven by internal dynamics of Indian society and economy. When comparing these texts to *Tears of the Begums: Stories of Survivors of the Uprising of 1857*, by Khwaja Hasan Nizami and Rana Safvi, certain similarities and differences emerge. While Dalrymple and Alavi focus on the political and socio-economic causes of the uprising, Nizami and Safvi's work sheds light on the human experience of the uprising. They do so by recounting the experiences of women who lived through the uprising and its aftermath, highlighting the trauma and cultural memory associated with the event. One of the significant similarities between the texts is their attention to the role of religion in the uprising. Alavi highlights the significance of religious beliefs and practices in shaping the attitudes of Indian sepoys towards the British. Similarly, Nizami and Safvi's work highlights the role of religion in shaping the experiences of women during the uprising, as they sought refuge in religious shrines and faced violence based on their religious identity.

However, a notable difference between the texts is their focus on the agency of the Indian people in the uprising. While Dalrymple and Alavi provide a broader perspective on the historical and structural factors that contributed to the uprising, Nizami and Safvi's work focuses on the lived experiences of individual women who were directly affected by the events. Through their stories, they emphasize the agency of Indian women in resisting British rule and the importance of recognizing their contributions to the historical narrative of the uprising.

The comparison of *Tears of the Begums* with other literary works on the 1857 uprising highlights the importance of considering different perspectives and genres in the representation of trauma and cultural memory. The work stands out for its focus on the experiences of women and the emotional impact of the events on individuals, providing a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of the events. By challenging traditional patriarchal and colonial narratives of the uprising, *Tears of the Begums* offers a more inclusive and complex representation of the trauma and cultural memory of the event.

To conclude, the findings of the research suggest that the 1857 uprising had a significant impact on women, both in terms of their physical experiences of violence and trauma and in terms of their social and cultural roles. The analysis of "*Tears of the Begums*" revealed a range of incidents that highlighted the complexity of women's experiences during the uprising, including instances of sexual violence, forced migration, and the loss of loved ones. Furthermore, the research found that the book contributed to the shaping of cultural memory around the 1857 uprising, particularly in terms of its



representation of women's experiences. The book offered a nuanced and empathetic portrayal of women's experiences of trauma, challenging dominant narratives that have often overlooked or silenced women's voices. Overall, the research highlights the importance of paying attention to women's experiences of trauma and their contributions to cultural memory, particularly in contexts of historical violence and conflict. By engaging with the complex and nuanced experiences of women during the 1857 uprising, "Tears of the Begums" offers a valuable contribution to the ongoing project of shaping cultural memory and historical narratives that are more inclusive and representative of diverse perspectives.

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