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### Voices of Anger and Despair: Disrupting Memories of War and Conflict in Contemporary Pashto Poetry on Social Media

Zia Ur Rahman<sup>1</sup>, Abid Ali Khan<sup>\*2</sup>, Nazia Khan<sup>3</sup>

Original Article

1. Ph.D. Scholar in English Literature, Department of English, University of Malakand.  
Email: zia.iu@gmail.com
2. M.Phil. Scholar in English Literature, Department of English, University of Malakand.  
Email: abidalikhanuom@gmail.com
3. M.Phil. Scholar in English Literature, Department of English, University, of Malakand.  
Email: naziakhan.edu@yahoo.com

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Post 9/11, War on Terror, Trauma, Alienation, Chaos, Pashto Poetry.

#### Abstract

*There has been a notable shift in the subject matter of Pakistani Literary Writers after the 9/11 attacks and subsequent War-on-Terror in many areas of Pakistan. In the aftermath of these incidents, majority areas of the country were severely affected. Like some other parts of the country, many regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA turned into active battlegrounds where many people lost their properties and livelihood while compelled others on migration to alien regions. It also cost them great physical, economic, and mental losses. During this era of absurdity, mental depression, and chaos writers felt the urge to express the new experiences and realities in new ways and thus war became a dominant theme in the writings of many writers. The war driven landscape was reflected in a grim, nostalgic, and fragmented language. Although, these themes and approaches were adopted by a variety of writers in different genres of literature, the current study investigates the reflection of these traumatic and chaotic events in Pashto poetry popular on social media. The sample of this study consists of various poems and stanzas from poets such as Israr Atal, Rahmat Shah Sayel, and some young poets who are known as social media poets. The current study is conducted through the theoretical perspective adopted from multiple theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Melvin Seeman, Fritz Pappenheim, Jean Paul Sarte and Albert Camus by mainly focusing on different aspects of disrupting memories of war, alienation, and absurdity. The main objective of this study is to highlight that how war and conflict affected people mentally and is still remembered in unpleasant memories.*

## 1. Introduction

According to Jackson (2018) "War on Terrorism is a term used to describe the American led global counterterrorism campaign launched in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001." According to Ahmad:

Under the rubric of the war on terror, different combatants were conducting different wars for different objectives within the triangle of terror. Some were big powers fishing in troubled waters. Others were nationalist entities wanting to assert central authority. Still others were tribesmen battling to maintain their ethnic and cultural boundaries, some also unabashedly seeking to discomfit their tribal rivals. Lurking somewhere in the background were the ever-thinning numbers of individuals associated with or accused of being al Qaeda. Shifting alliances, general distrust, betrayals, paranoia, and fear marked the war on terror (Ahmad, 2013, p.10).

The war had a multidimensional scope in many areas of the world. Along with attacks on many Muslim countries, the United States and its allies started operations for militants in various countries. In fact, the United States believed that countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen had turned a blind eye to the activities of the militant groups. As a result, some areas of Pakistan were directly interfered while the government was also pressurized to take action against those groups who were considered as religious extremist by America and its allies. Although the operation was termed to be against the specific militant groups, its effects reached the general public. Many people left their homes in settled temporary in areas which were safe. Areas of FATA, Swat, Dir, Buner, Malakand, and Kohistan were specifically targeted. The war between militants and government security groups created a sense of alienation, disillusionment, chaos, and general terror.

### War on Terror and Pashtu Poetry

Militancy and terrorism have had a profound impact on Pukhtun society on every level since 9/11. Literature and the arts are no exceptions. (Muhammad, 2014). Literature is the reflection of society in words of truth and beauty. After 9/11 a great shift in the thematic dimensions of Pashtu poetry occurred. The poetry of the time reflected the chaos, alienation, and confusion. According to a Research Study by FATA Research Centre on Impact of War on Terror on Pashto Literature and Art.

Pashto literature underwent a significant change after the tragic incident of 9/11. As a war was initiated on the soil of Pashtuns almost immediately after the shocking event took place. The bloodshed, bomb blasts, drone attacks and aerial firing compelled writers to forget evergreen topics of love, romance and nature. The violent circumstances that rose from the ashes of 9/11 compelled Pashto literati to write about broken families, severed limbs, war-torn infrastructure (mosques and schools) and displaced people rather than silky curls and rosy cheeks of their beloveds (Mehsud, 2015, p.5).

According to Hanif (2014) "Pashto language has dealt with the topic with more seriousness and attention as compared to other languages. The obvious reason is that the event directly relates to Pashtu Literature and society." (Hanif, 2014, p.124). Pashtu poetry written after war on terror has profoundly focused on the physical and mental psychological damage done to the people of war affected areas. Poets have reflected on the causes of war which resulted in leaving thousand eole dead, numerous injured and millions homeless. The poets have condemned and resisted militancy in their poems. According to Ghazala et al. "Pashtun poets have vividly portrayed the picture of the society affected by terrorism and the operations against terrorism. The poets have either directly suffered themselves from terrorism or they have suffered passively, as their relatives, friends or

neighbors have suffered” (p.62). Pashtun poetry over the last 10 to 15 years, going from the subjects of love, mysticism and beauty that earlier dominated the tradition to ones of war, oppression and a longing for peace (Shah, 2023).

## **2. Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To investigate the voices of anger and despair of Pashto poets in the aftermath of 9/11 and War on Terror.
2. To probe into the elements of disrupting memories, alienation, absurdity, and chaos in contemporary Pashto poetry.

## **3. Research Questions**

1. How the contemporary Pashto poets have expressed their anger and despair against the imposed war in their poetry?
2. What are the elements of disrupting memories, alienation, absurdity, and chaos related to war and conflict in the poems?

## **4. Literature Review**

The Literature on war mainly deals with the consequences of the conflict which may be physical, mental, and psychological. It also reveals the meaning of life in the war or after and also the worth of values like sacrifice, loyalty, and courage. For the reflection of chaos and horror of war, the writers also adopted new techniques and innovation in the variety of subject matter but the reality of war is reflected in realistic style by many of the authors. A blend of traditional and the modern is also found. Various genres of literature record the causes and effects of the conflict but also the way where many imaginative qualities of such works appeal to the imagination of the readers as they find identification with these characters. Similar is the case with Pashto Literature produced during or after War on Terror. Different dimensions of Pashto Literature have been explored by researchers during that particular war.

In their study, Hina and Jamil (2016), found that

After the commencement of War on Terror, the question of identity has been lost somewhere. There appears to be a chasm of loss of identity as the forces to be, keeps pushing Pakhtuns into becoming nothing but militants. The collective identity the Pakhtuns strived for centuries is blown to smithereens by the drone attacks where the individual Pakhtun looks around in dust at the chaos and bemoans only (p.11).

Another study conducted by Hanif investigates the shift in the thematic perspectives in the poetry of different poets mostly from FATA:

The Pashto Poetry show a very horrifying picture of Afghanistan and Pakistani Pakhtun regions generally and especially her tribal areas present a shocking picture of human massacre, terrorism, brutality, barbarism, ignorance horror and cruelty. This wave of horror and terror is not limited to Pakhtun region of Pakistan and FATA but now it is engulfing the whole of Pakistan and neighboring countries also cannot escape its effects (Hanif, 2014, p.133).

A Research Study was conducted by FATA Research Centre on Impact of War on Terror on Pashto Literature and Art (2014) in which the impacts of War have been revealed on Pashto Literature and Art. According to the report “war on terror has greatly affected Pashto literature, especially fictional writing. The themes of love and romance have been replaced with dark depictions of violence” (Mehsud 2014, p.25). In his research article on the ‘Reflection on Militancy

and Talibanization in the Pashto Poetry of Swat', Muhammad Ali found that, "After 2001 when the terrorism spread to all Pashtun areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, almost all the writers started writing against the Taliban and militancy. A consensus of all professional and visible writers against terrorism and militancy is obvious" (Ali, 2016, p.55). A study conducted by Ahmad et al. (2021) found that:

After 9/11, Pashto poetry played a vital role in countering militancy, terrorism and 'war on terrorism.' Pashto poetry introduced themes of Peace, Condemnation of War, Nationalism, and Resilience along with others ...These themes in Pashto poetry helped to counter violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa created by militancy, terrorism and 'war on terrorism'. (p.55).

Caron and Khan (2021) investigated the reaction of poets from Swat towards the terrorism and militancy. According to the researchers:

Poets in Swat have produced an analysis of war as ontological devastation, but also protest their reduction, in the minds of others and themselves, to the violence-stricken present. This intervention is not an intellectual critique alone. Focusing on a new genre of "resistance" poetry, this article shows how poets resist war by maintaining worlds partly beyond it. In this, the critical content and the social lives of poetry are inseparable (Caron & Khan, 2021, p. 149).

According to an article published in Dawn (December 31st, 2014) "About 2,000 new Pashto titles were published in the year 2014, according to booksellers. Most of the writers of these books focus on issues related to militancy, sufferings of people and restoration of lasting peace in the region."

## **5. Research Design and Methodology**

The current research is qualitative in nature and deals with the topic through textual and close reading techniques. The research sample consists of various lines and stanzas from Pashto poems about war and conflict. The meanings, symbols, and motif have been textually analyzed with reference to the appropriate theoretical and conceptual frameworks mentioned below.

The theoretical framework of this study is adopted from multiple theorists and philosophers such as Cathy Caruth, Melvin Seeman, Fritz Pappenheim, Jean Paul Sarte and Albert Camus by mainly focusing on different aspects of disrupting memories of war, alienation, and absurdity. The main objective of the proposed study is to highlight that how war has been a global ugliest phenomenon affecting innocent inhabitants mentally and psychologically.

## **6. Data Analysis and Discussion**

The contemporary Pashto poetry deals with the issues of war and conflict to a large extent. On the one hand, the poets refer to the memories of these unpleasant events while on the other hand, they also deal with the contemporary events of terror and lawlessness. Young Pashto poets are predominantly writing about the conflict that has beset their region (Naeem, 2013).

### **6.1. Traumatic and Disruptive Memories of War**

Trauma theory is a comparatively a recent development. The theory mainly interprets representations of an extreme experience and its effects upon identity and memory...Examining the cultural context of an individual or collective group's experience of trauma enables greater attention to representations of extreme experience such as rape, war, the Holocaust, the Gulag, American slavery, colonial oppression, and racism. (Balaev, 2012). Traumatic and disrupting memories of terror related incidents are quite evident in many Pashto poems where the poets express their anger and despair over these incidents. One such unforgettable event was the attack

on the army public school Peshawar where innocent children were targeted by the militants. Poet Ali Shan Majbor represents this event in his poem as:

*Tawde Weene da School da Halakanu Bahedale,  
Golai da Mashumanu pa saronu lagedale  
Au parpati ye wahale zalimanu ba ledale.*

Translation:

The warm blood was flowing from the bodies of schoolboys,  
The bullets penetrating in their heads,  
These cruel had no mercy while the boys were screaming... (Majboor, 2014).

These lines clearly reflect the poet's angst over the tragedy of APS remembered and referred to frequently.

These terror events have been occurring in great number since the American invasion of Afghanistan and Pakistan's decision of involving itself in this war. Even the religious places were targeted and chaos prevailed everywhere. While remembering these events, some Pashto poets have been considering it a pre-planned from the government agencies:

*Pa sazish mu talah shwe gulistan de,  
Da barodu pa logo ki pat asmaan de  
Pa dagha shour ki da sartoro khwendu koki kheje  
Che raayad she nan mi hm da zra na sreki kheje.*

Translation:

The destruction of my beautiful homeland is pre-planned,  
The sky is covered by the smoke of dynamite,  
In the midst of these shatters the screams of sisters is heard while heads uncovered,  
Oh! With the memory of that scene, the pain in my heart revives...

These lines clearly reflect the poet's anger and concern regarding the loss of innocent lives. The memories still disturb him and he feels his inner feelings of anger and despair in his poetic language.

## **6.2. Hopelessness, Frustration, and Loss**

In the wake of continuous lack of rule and law and insecurity, the Pashto poets have expressed their hopelessness and frustration. Unknown militant killing innocent people and creating chaos and fear have been the daily news. As a result, people especially the young social media poets have been raising their concerns in artistic expressions. One such poet is Ali Khan Umeed, who expresses his concern in these words:

*Pa Qadam Qadan nakam dae  
Bs kafiru ta mi bozae  
Dlta adam istihkam de  
Bs kafiro ta mi bozae*

Translation:

Failure is my fate on every step,  
Just take me to the non-believers,  
Here only chaos prevails, and no peace,  
Take me to the non-believers (Umeed, 2019).

The poet expresses his extreme grief on the current scenario dominated by uncertainty and chaos. The poet wants to be taken to a faraway place where justice prevails. The overall poem highlights the injustice and oppression where fear rules. The anti-war and anti-violence sentiment is quite obvious.

The famous Pashto poet Rahmat Shah Sail also refers to this fact in one of his poem 'Kabul and Peshawar Are the Closest of Friends'. The poet expresses his concern for the lack of security in both Kabul and Peshawar.

*Claims of the world's prosperity are lies*

*While the homes of the Pashtoons lie in ruins.....* (Cited in Osman, 2013).

Similar concerns are expressed by Habib Jalbi Wal in his poem. Due to the continued terror and chaos, silence is dominated and the poet feels pessimistic:

*The streets are hushed*

*Where one should go, the whole place is ablaze..*

The poetry of Dr. Muhammad Israr Atal contains various references to the loss caused by war and conflict. In one of his poem, he refers to the changes brought by the war and terror such as insecurity and fear:

*Da di shakman khar na mi wera kege,*

*Os che pa lara zam kusa badlaom,*

*Di Pekhawar ki pa yau kor ki osam*

*Sahar zanzer, makham jranda badlaom...*

Translation:

This doubtful city gives me fear,

Now I change the streets while on a journey,

I reside in a house in Peshawar,

But I have to change the door chain in morning and lock in the evening... (Atal, 2022).

### **6.3. Violence, Terror, and Chaos**

The frequent terror incidents and ongoing violence have been the constant sources of fear and chaos during the times of war and conflict. Pashto poets have been reflecting the violence and bloodshed in vivid figurative language. The following verse from the famous social media poet, Bakht Zada Danish employs all types of imagery to reflect the violence of war and conflict:

*Da Che Sra Weena Bahege*

*Da Tawda Weena Bahege,*

*Lar au Bar mi a Watan ki ukhtana Weena Bahege...*

Translation:

The red blood that is pouring,

The warm blood that is pouring,

The blood of Pashtuns is flowing everywhere...

(Danish, 2021).

### **6.4. Homelessness, Displacement, and Migration**

According to Murcia (2020), "displacement consistently results in the loss of home and it is experienced as the loss of people's place in the world. Their loss of home was not only experienced as the loss of a physical shelter and its financial value but primarily as the loss of a place in which their lives were fulfilled with existential meaning. Despite the fact that the displaced found a new place for dwelling, most of them stressed the feeling of being out of place within their own country" (p.1361).

The war on terror compelled many families to leave their homes and migrate to alien regions. They left their properties and experienced painful journeys while looking for safe places in other districts of the province or parts of the country. These unpleasant experiences of becoming homeless and migrating to other regions were reflected in the poetry of that time as well as remembered now. The

following lines from Yaseen Ashna.. clearly reveal the poet's dejection over migration and displacement.

*Khalak ze da Pekhavar na  
Kadi Wri da Pekhavar na  
Meinde zan pasi rakagi,  
Khpl bachi da Pekhavar na.....  
Os hr lori khwara di  
Shna logi da Pekhavar na*

Translation:

People are migrating from the city of Peshawar,  
Taking away their belongings,  
The mothers dragging their sons out from Peshawar,  
Now the green smoke has overwhelmed,  
The city of Pashawar (Yaseen,2022).

These lines clearly depict the Poet's concern about the deteriorating situation of law and order in Peshawar. Mothers are compelled to leave the City of Flowers to the mercy of terrorists.

### 6.5. Absurdity and Alienation

The absurd and alienated existence during the time of war and conflict is another main source of despair for the Pashto poets. The absurd states that there is a conflict between humans wanting to find meaning in life and the reality that there is no meaning in life at all. Alienation on the other hand, also elucidates the estrangement individuals feel from themselves, each other, and the world they inhabit. This sentiment of detachment and disconnection emerges when societal structures and values erode the authentic human experience.

These themes of absurdity and alienation are prevalent in the poetry of young social media poets. For instance, the following lines of one of the poem of Munir Buneri highlights the mental trauma and existence of individuals in the aftermath of war and conflict:

*Da baran shpa rata rayad shwala,  
Yau hadisa rata rayada shwala  
Cha wel nan bia pa Pekhavar ki damaka shwe da  
Cha wel nan bia pa khaistono bandi wor pori de  
Cha wel nan bia pa sro golono bandi wor pori de  
Da dera drda mi salgai ware ware wkre  
Dumra bewasa wom chez zan ta mi khere wkre.....  
Aye bs de rozgar pregda, da khar pregda, halat kha na di  
Ma drla khpl gawand ki khpal kali ki kor newale.*

Translation:

That rainy night revived in my mind,  
The night of an incident,  
Someone told that there has been a bomb blast in Peshawar,  
He said that the beauty of the city was set ablazed,  
The red flowers set on fire,  
Due to grief I sobbed that night,  
In a state of helplessness, I cursed myself,.....  
Oh! Enough! Stop the daily toil, leave the city,  
The deteriorating situation does not suit you,  
I have hired a new home for you in my neighbourhood (Buneri, 2023).

The above lines clearly refer to the existence in war times. The poet expresses his concern for his near and dear one and states he would like him to sacrifice his business and city life.

### Conclusion

Like other regions of Pakistan, the incident of 9/11 and subsequent War on Terror deeply affected the Pashtun culture and socioeconomic conditions. The war not only affected the people of this region physically but also mentally and economically. The effects of this war are still felt by the literary writers of the affected regions in their traumatic memories and military and terror are condemned. These poets have bravely raised their voice against the brutalities and violence against the general public. These voices on the one hand contain anger but on the other hand the helpless tone is also quite evident since the futile war is out of the control of common lot. These concerns are not only highlighted in the poetry of that time but also the disruptive memories of those events are still referred to by Pashto poets. The main concerns reflected in these disruptive memories include; violence, bloodshed, fear, chaos, homelessness, migration, existence in the time of war, hopelessness, and despair etc.

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