



## Memory, Trauma, and the Outsider's Gaze: Women and Conflict in Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the idea nationality of memory, trauma, gender, and conflict in the selected literary text *The Far Field* by Madhuri Vijay. The study explores the discourses of hegemonical militarization, marginality and silencing through a counter narrative demonstration. Drawing on the foregrounding limitations of liberty, absences, and excluded institutional records the article examines the role of literature as active participation in enabling cultural negotiation from the position of outsider-observer, constructing the structural violence. Through this reading the literary text destabilizes the politics of nation and belonging. The cultural models significantly readmit the comfort of resolution as an active site of cultural struggle, negotiation, and meaning-making.

**Keywords:** Memory, Trauma, Gender, Outsider-observer, Cultural belongingness and Postcolonial Context.

### Introduction:

The objective of this research is to study the perspectives offered by an outsider who visits Kashmir regarding the situation in Kashmir. Interestingly the narrator of this novel is a woman, the novel offers deep insights into the how women sensitively deal about the human relationships and how the personal quest helps her to explore the political side of the conflict-ridden area of Kashmir. It also demonstrates the significance of keeping women at the novel's center. It examines the situation of women who had gone through the traumatic situation in the decade of insurgency (1989-90). The research attempts to understand the emotional trauma of women vis-à-vis, how they find an expression of these concerns through memoirs of political and social aspects.

Madhuri Vijay is interested in the lives of Kashmiri people their loss, politics, and social conflicts in the Kashmir region. Her debut novel, *The Far Field* is based on Kashmir, which received JCB Prize, which is considered the highest literary award in India for literature. *The Far Field* captures glimpses of troubles in Kashmir, and the traumatic experiences undergone by innocent citizens. The novel focuses on death, betrayal, conflict, and violence that has continued even after the insurgency period has subsided.

The novel is about Shalini who visits Kishtwar to meet Bashir Ahmed after her mother's demise. Bashir Ahmed was a Kashmiri vendor, who visited people's homes to sell various goods that he brought from Kashmir. Shalini feels that he had some sort of relationship with



her mother. After her mother's demise, she is curious to know and explore this relationship. She plans a trip to Kashmir to meet Bashir Ahmed. During her journey, she encounters Abdul Latief and Bashir Ahmed's tangled family history. It is through such observations that Shalini realizes how painful memories are stored and kept alive even after the death of their loved ones for years by the Kashmiri people.

Through courage, the women of Kashmir provided safety to refugees and throughout the conflict they stood with their men in every phase of their struggle. Women of Kashmir, howsoever, had paid a cost, which often precedes in all such conflicted zones either by losing the lone breadwinner of the family to a bullet or they went missing.

### **Narrative Perspective and the Problem of Witnessing:**

**In the novel, *The Far Field: An Eye-opening Journey***, Shalini is a young woman protagonist and the narrator of the novel. She loses her mother when she is a college student at an age of 21. It is difficult for Shalini to contemplate the loss of her mother and she remains involved in visiting clubs with her friends wasting almost two precious years after college. Her mother's memory does not leave her, and she recalls her mother's relationship with a handsome Kashmiri man, Bashir Ahmed, who visited her frequently to sell hand-made Kashmiri items. She decides to meet Ahmed to know the reason for her mother's death. Finally, she plans a visit to Kashmir, lying to her father that she needed to do some field work for a project there.

Shalini provides minute details of her journey and how every small experience impacts her. On reaching Kishtwar she started searching for a place to stay. Luckily her taxi driver, Mr. Majid helped her find a place to stay with one family. As a narrator, Shalini provides little details as to how she was served food before she was given the room. She got a room at a fare of Rs 400/- that included both breakfast and dinner. She talks about the hospitality of the people, their helpful nature, and forth willingness to help. She talks about the reason for coming to Kashmir to the owner Abdul Latief and Zoya. She tells them about Bashir Ahmed whom she met eleven years ago at the age of eleven and how Bashir Ahmed mostly visited her house to sell Kashmiri hand-made clothes. Later, he stopped coming to their house. She is keen to find him. Both, Abdul Latief and Zoya, agreed to help her in the search of finding Bashir Ahmed in the village.

When she starts searching Ahmed's house then she encounters different conflicts, violence, and tangled histories of the families. She has reached the level where she must make a series of choices for the people with whom she has come to live and interacts with them. Zoya usually remained quiet. She hardly spoke. Abdul Latief's mother informs Shalini that Zoya's eight-year-old son Ishfaq was picked up by the Army. Shalini and Zoya, begin the search for her son. Zoya and she visit different Army camps but they did not find any clue of his appearance.

Finally, with the help of Saleem, Shalini can find Bashir Ahmed's house in the mountains. She visits Ahmed's son, Rayaz at their house and spends days with them. Shalini is amazed at the beauty of the place and the way of life of the Kashmiri people. She visits the village under the guidance of Rayaz Ahmed's wife. Having come from a cosmopolitan city, this village life is new for her. She is mesmerized by the beauty of Kashmir which is in complete contrast to urban city life. She resides outside the state and desires to see the beauty of the place and grows to love it. She enjoys the beauty of villages, their tight-knit clusters of homes flung open to the mountainside, separated by narrow rocky ridges and terraced



cornfields. She visited different places around the village. She started learning about village customs and traditions from their family members. While roaming, she meets the village sarpanch, Mohammad Din, one who gives work to Rayaz Ahmed and takes care of the village. They indulge in conversations about the development of the village, problems faced by local people, and government care. Mohammad Din explains that the government does not care about mountain people, money that Jammu and Kashmir get from the government, half goes to places like Srinagar, and Gulmarg and the other goes to the Yatras. People of the villages have to visit Jammu city for medical treatment. He wanted to have a road that could connect the village to the highway, for a modern hospital and college. (*The Far Field* 183).

One evening, Shalini notices an elderly man sitting in a room and attempts to say 'Aadab (greeting)' to him. After some time, the elderly man replied get out of the room. She recognizes the same accent that Bashir Ahmed had. That voice reminded her of Bashir Ahmed, whose voice she had heard in her childhood. She then became irritated and argued with Amina, asking why she was being kept in the dark. Then Amina starts to talk about her father-in-law Bashir Ahmed. She tells her about an accident that happened in Kishtwar five years ago when militants killed Hindu residents of the village. Those militants were not Kashmiri, but most people say that their leader was a Kashmiri. During the attack, sixteen Hindus were killed by the militants. Since people did not have faith in Bashir Ahmed, the people of the village started to believe that was done by Bashir Ahmed. Only his family and relatives knew that he was innocent and had not killed the Hindus. To save her husband's life Amina's mother-in-law decided that Bashir Ahmed should get into hiding. The army had broken his legs and left him thinking he was already dead, or he would die soon in the snow. By hiding him, his wife was saving him from the soldiers. She did not want the soldiers to come back again and try to kill her husband. Already they have broken Bashir's legs. Everyone in the village assumed that he had died. For this reason, Bashir Ahmed went underground, to hide from the people as well as from the Army. The villagers stayed away from this house because they felt that the Bashir had been killed, only the village's Sarpanch kept talking and he did not know about it. That is why the family members didn't tell him anything. In Kashmir, mostly soldiers visit every household for a routine checkup. Moreover, every time they asked questions like "Have you seen anyone around here that you do not recognize? Strangers? Outsiders? Other than, of her, of course." (*The Far Field*, 219).

One evening, Shalini recollected the history of 1995 when Bashir Ahmed again visited her house in Bangalore and stayed there for almost three weeks. He discussed all that had happened to him during his visits to his native home. He found a job in Kashmir when there was nothing available to do. People who hired him did not pay proper salaries to people who worked as daily wagers. He earned only an amount that was barely enough for the rice to be brought for the family. Although, he did not involve with any militant group. During the early period of the insurgency, some people joined militants and some of them were picked by the army. Some were arrested and killed by the military. He said that his son, Alhamdulillah, was too young and was to be kept saved from the outer world.

One day, Shalini's parents called their friends for dinner at their house. Those were not the real friends of her father who met over golf, beers, and games of cards. Her parents only called them twice or thrice a year when they hosted dinners. Her father knew Bashir Ahmed well, but that day her father started arguing and discussing problems in Kashmir. He said that India has been taking care of Kashmir for more than forty years. Indian people have given



Kashmiris jobs, roads, power, and hospitals, and their taxes have provided education to thousands of Kashmiri children. They anticipate being thanked in exchange, the Kashmiri people were creating tension and violence and kept yelling pro-Pakistan chants, and kept burning Indian flags. He asked Ahmed, “Would you agree?” (*The Far Field* 261) He says:

...then I will tell you what I think. I think that for more than forty years, India has taken care of Kashmir. We have given you jobs and roads, power, and hospitals. Our taxes have provided education to thousands of Kashmiri children. So, it doesn't seem like too much to expect some gratitude in return, instead those people you have up there blowing up buildings, shouting slogans for Pakistan, burning Indian Flags, and what not. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Ahmed? Doesn't that make sense to you? If someone takes you into his home and gives you a bed and puts food in your mouth without asking any questions, don't you think you owe him something in return? (*The Far Field* 261)

Bashir Ahmed responded quietly about the predicament of the Kashmiris and how they were perceived by people outside Kashmir without knowing the actual difficulties faced by them.

You are an intelligent man. Anyone can see that. You have a big business and a big house, and I respect you for that. And you are correct: you do not know what I think. I have been working and traveling in this country for many years now, and I have seen a lot. But I will tell you this: you are not the only one who believes as you do. Many others think the same way, who think that people should be happy with whatever they get, even if it is not what they want. And I will also tell you this: as long as people like you believe the things you do, then those people in Kashmir, as you call them, will not go away. No, Janab. They will become more and more in numbers, and soon other people will join them. Ordinary people like me. And, for your sake, I hope that day does not come because that is when you will have something to worry about. (*The Far Field* 262).

Bashir Ahmed after this discussion is hurt and left the house the next day. He said that would honor his commitment as he had promised that he would not stay for long. He said that he will never be able to thank him properly for his kindness for letting him stay at their house. The next morning Shalini accompanied him to the gate of the house, then he left the house from there.

While in Kashmir, Shalini meets Mohammad Din again, then during the conversation, he offers her to teach in the school for the betterment of village students. He ensures to take official permission from the education board to hire a teacher without a B.Ed. He agrees to pay so that students could benefit from her. He is not sure to ask Shalini because he knows that she has a good job in Bangalore, and probably does not want to leave that job. He does not force her to answer, he tells her to think before answering.



Whenever she goes to some busy place, residents made her feel like an outsider, and thought that she would write about the poor Kashmiri people about their suffering with the Army. They always gave her a reproving look. Some people thought that outsiders do not have friends in the villages of Kashmir. They know that only journalists and human rights activists come to villages to get information. At night they returned to their houses.

One morning Shalini went to Bashir's room where he was hiding. That time Bashir finally broke the silence for the first time in front of Shalini after 11 years. He said that you knew you had matured. The voice of Bashir has not changed, it was the same as it was eleven years back. He started asking how did she find his house, she replied that it was because of the stories he told her in childhood. She discovered that Kishtwar was the location of one of Shah Baghdadi's tales after researching it online. She came to know about the precise cause of the peasants' disappearance by speaking with Bashir Ahmed. He begins to recall the early days of the insurgency when there were only two or three militant organizations present. But as time went on, more and more groups began to emerge, and one group began to have two distinct leaders. While some people were open to speaking with the government, others were not. Nothing has altered so far, particularly for common people. People are forced to choose between the troops and civilians. People there are terrified because the army frequently arrives and beats them for refusing to provide any information about the militants. This is followed by militants arriving and assaulting individuals for providing the army with information. People occasionally imagine the military competing with one another.

Additionally, Bashir shares with Shalini details regarding the Bangalore celebration night, when her mother wanted to leave with him to Kishtwar. It was difficult to run away at that time and she was not in the mood to listen. She says that her mother died three years ago. Ahmed sobbed in silence as she heard about her mother's passing. His mourning showed how caring he was towards her mother. She told Bashir that whatever her mother did was neither for him nor for anyone else. She was here just to see him when her mother died, she missed him a lot and wanted to see him again. Then at last she held Bashir's hand and then said that she must come back again and left his house.

Towards, the end of the novel, she was invited by Brigadier Reddy to Udhampur for dinner. Brigadier shared his personal experience about his parents and wife, and how his mother consumed poison. One night, his father committed suicide by jumping off a ship near the coast of Myanmar at the age of thirty-eight. He was eleven years old when his father died. His father's death burned his mother from the inside. She shared his concerns about the life of villagers, her village experiences, and her motive for visiting Kishtwar.

After returning to Bangalore from Jammu airport. she meets her father and tells him all that happened to her in Kishtwar as well as during the travel. She also talks about learning how to walk on mountain paths and learning to milk a cow every morning. She then tells of her old friend Bashir Ahmed's family, whom she stayed with all time. He is married now and has children. On Sunday evening, both go out to have dinner at her father's favorite restaurant. Her father informs her of his willingness to marry a woman he had been seeing. He was with a woman from the United State of America. She was a doctor, did not have children, and was divorced. He asked her if she had any problems with it. To which she said she had no problem. After spending a few weeks, on a Friday afternoon, she sits in front of the TV, suddenly she hears the news of Kishtwar. She hears on tv that the army has lifted the curfew. She contacted the family of Zoya and Rayaz, knowing the conditions there. Somehow Zoya's voice is cold because Rayaz was arrested by the army on a complaint from a small boy. She then contacted





the Brigadier to inquire about the reason for the arrest of Rayaz Ahmed. She threatened to go to the media for this act. She received a difficult reply from the Brigadier who suspected her to have ties with terrorists. If he told that to her father, what could his reaction be? This is how the Brigadier threatens her. Brigadier also said that her behavior in this whole matter has not been exactly above board either. He said that she had run away from home without telling her father, landing up in some godforsaken village in the middle of nowhere. Her actions are innocent, one can accuse her of not being innocent. At last, he disconnected the call.

In the end, she remarks, "I am thirty years old and that is nothing." This world has changed. Six years have passed since she last visited the metropolis where she was born, and grew up. Every day, she recollects the people whom she left in the mountains of Kishtwar. She wonders about the people throughout the journey to whether they are in a good position or bad position. She also wondered about all the other members of Bashir Ahmed's house, especially Riyaz's mother, who never trusted her till her last day. For six years she has given herself one reason or another for not speaking and acting. After some days she moved to the U.S.A to settle there. She came back for one reason that is her father who was shifted to the hospital after a minor heart attack. She spent five nights with him in the hospital.

## **Kashmir as a Contested Cultural and Political Space:**

The title of the novel, *The Far Field*, is profoundly symbolic, figurative, and metaphoric. It states that a young strong girl travels from Bangalore to Kishtwar, in Jammu and Kashmir to search for man, Bahsir Ahmed, who visited from Kashmir to meet her mother in Bangalore during her childhood. She eagerly wanted to know about her mother's death and if it was somehow connected to Bashir Ahmed. After reaching Kishtwar she was brought face to face with Kashmir's politics and the tangled history of the families. The term "Far" is meant for Kashmir that is in the far North of India and the protagonist travels from the south, there is a sizeable distance between the two cities. Moreover, due to the conflict in Kashmir, the Kashmiris are cut off from the rest of India, therefore there is a sense of distance. The word 'Field' is also symbolic of a fertile land as Kashmir is a beautiful fertile land. It has another significance of being a battlefield since the place now occupied by army all around and the regular violence and conflict that has disturbed the peace of the place indicates 'field' to be a battlefield. Hence, the writer has used the word "Far Field" which means the area away from the city where a lot of difficulties happened before her arrival and are continuous.

In one of her interviews with Prayaag Akbar, she says that she was born in the 80s and grew up in the 90s when conflict in Kashmir was arising at its peak in Kashmir. All things were unknown to her at the time of her adolescence. She was born in the same country where she did not know about the one among the states in India. People, with whom she grew up did not give attention to these things. She and her friends who were born with her did not much know about Kashmir. She says that the suicide attack 9/11 that happened on September 11, 2001, shocked her far more than that of Kashmir. After that, she thinks, of Indian novels set in other different parts of the country like Bombay, Calcutta, Uttar Pradesh, and Kashmir, but few have been set in Bangalore, where she resides. She chooses a place in Bangalore to write this novel. This thing has led her to write *The Far Field* (The JCB Prize, 12:23).

She wants to focus on a family that is centered around mother, father, and daughter, and have gone through difficult events through geopolitical events. No other relatives like aunts, uncles, or grandparents are mentioned in the novel. It is portrayal of a nuclear family. She



writes about desire, love, and fear related to history and politics. She wants to explore how a family goes through the political and personal events simultaneously and how the personal and the political collide with each other.

Throughout the course of writing the novel, the writer spent four years in the Kashmir region of the Doda district. She volunteered at Haji Public school at the village of Breswana, in the Doda District of Kashmir. She taught elementary things to children from 2012-2016. She taught mathematics, history, music, yoga, and sports. She acquired a vast experience but all that has no reference in her book. (Books on Toast 38:40) Her book focuses on the political concerns of Kashmir and her mother's story. She has discussed the issues of disappearance, memories, and political realities.

### **Gender, Voice, and Silenced Subjectivities:**

Shalini and her mother have a unique relationship in the novel. She serves as her mother's secret keeper. Shalini was once told by her mother that no one should know about Bashir Ahmed's secret visit. When her mother died, she was left alone and becomes lonely and depressed. That loneliness and depression returned her to the memories of her mother. Shalini is curious to know about the cause of the death of her mother and in an attempt to join those threads she is reminded of her mother's relationship with Bashir Ahmed. She knew that her mother was the happiest woman when Bashir Ahmed visited her at Bangalore. She was a child at that time and did not have the sense to understand the relationship of her mother with Bashir Ahmed. She is eager to know the reason, why her mother was always happy when he was around. She does not understand the reason behind the happiness. Whenever Bashir Ahmed came to Bangalore, he brought joy to her mother's face.

She recollected the stories that were told by Bashir Ahmed. He used to tell stories about his own childhood. She never heard anybody speak with his mother the way he did, with such liberty and daring. Her mother threw her head back and laughed continuously listening to stories Bashir told. Somehow, it seemed that his stories related to his own life. He starts with Shah Baghdadi who came from the city of Baghdad, in Iraq, therefore, people called him Shah Baghdadi. He had a lot of knowledge about the world, read many books, and performed magic. After spending time in his house in Kishtwar, when she visits Kashmir now, she realizes that the stories he narrated were based on his life. Both mother and daughter listened to him carefully. Madhuri Vijay writes in Shalini's voice:

"In Kashmir, a long time ago," he said, "there lived an old man. Because he had come from the city of Baghdad, in Iraq, people called him shah Baghdadi. This old man, he was a pir. Do you know what is, Beti? A Pir?" I shook my hand. "a wise man," Bashir Ahmed said solemnly. "This Shah Baghdad had read many books, and he knew a lot about the world. He could even perform magic. People who were sick would go to him, and he would heal them. But he was very careful with his powers, you see because he knew that were gifts from Allah." (*The Far Field*, 38)



Further, he speaks about a boy who lived in a village. One day he found two leopard cubs in a cave and brought them home. In the evening the cub's mother started stalking villagers and killing dogs, and sheep. Another story he narrated was about a *chudail* (witch), how this *chudail* could transform into a lady and lure lone male travelers. Her mother never seemed bothered by the illogical elements of Bashir Ahmed's stories.

Bashir Ahmed always remained quiet whenever he stayed at Shalini's house. As a child, she never thought of asking Ahmed, as to what pleasures he gained from the quiet and comfort of the house. She realized that Bashir Ahmed visited them almost twelve or fifteen times in three years. His way of speaking to her mother was polite, as compared to others. He spoke to her very politely, and she responded to him in the same polite way. She observes that there was brightness and merriment around her mother when he was in the room and she became dull when he departed. Her father and Bashir Ahmed represented two different worlds, Bashir Ahmed belonged to the world of afternoons and her father represented the world of evenings. Whenever Bashir Ahmed went home, he reminded Shalini that her mother is not in the mood to listen as she does not behave like a woman. He told Shalini to inform her mother that he would return soon as he was going for some work. It was Shalini's duty to shield Ahmed from her mother's rage. After her mother's death Shalini remembers the time spent with Bashir Ahmed and persuades herself to find Bashir Ahmed to know and understand more about her mother.

## **Grief, Memory, and Emotional Displacement:**

The novel has been written from a woman's perceptive as the central protagonist of the novel is a woman and so is the writer. Shalini is much disturbed after her mother's death and feels that she has lost an important part of her life, not just that she realizes the void her mother experienced in her marital life and therefore, her mother's inclination and attachment to Bashir Ahmed, a carpet seller from Kashmir. Shalini, in order to make sense of her mother's life and to fill in the void after her death she goes to Kashmir to look for Bashir Ahmed.

Women characters play a very significant role in Madhuri Vijay's novel. Zoya, who is Abdul Latief's wife in Kishtwar, where Shalini stays during her visit to Kishtwar, is a mother of a disappeared son. Zoya represents many such women of Kashmir who had lost their family members, their sons, or husband or fathers to anonymity. These people had either been detained by Army or they had disappeared to join the terror organizations. For Shalini staying in this family is a very different experience, both culturally and socially. While Shalini is a city bred girl, who is brought up in a nuclear family, she feels that there is a sense of community that Kashmiris adhered to. Zoya always spoke with her husband in Kashmiri. She helped Shalini by making and serving food for her. She rose early morning and sat next to her husband in the dark waiting for *Azan* (call for prayer). On hearing the *Azan*, she returned with a small prayer rug on which she made her prayers. She always wore a headscarf that helped her to keep her head warm. Initially, she remained silent and never expressed or talked to Shalini about the disappearance of her son. Later, when she begins to trust Shalini, they restart the search for Zoya's son. Shalini didn't find any sign of Zoya's son in the house where she stayed for nearly a fortnight and never heard any name mentioned in any talk. She is one among the women who had lost their son. Zoya never forgot the place where something happened to her son. They walked together down the street during the day. Then, she tells Shalini about an accident where soldiers had taken her son Ishfaq. They only found his school bag. She remembered everything





about the place. She came back to that place after five years only to show it to Shalini. She had built trust with Shalini. The sense of loss, Zoya for her son and Shalini for her mother is something common between them that brings them to place of disappearance of Zoya's son. He treats Shalini like her daughter. Madhuri Vijay writes:

... "no." she pointed to a patch of pavement. "This place is the place from where the soldiers took Ishfaq. We found his school bag here." Behind the wrought-iron gate was a cracked pathway, overgrown with weeds, which led to a large, crumbling house. I found that I couldn't speak.... I used to come here, she said her eyes were still lowered, fixed on the pavement. "I thought I would find something. I didn't know what. I found a pencil once, but it could have belonged to anyone, any schoolchild. After a while, I stopped coming this way. This is the first time I've stood in this spot in almost five years. (*The Far Field* 108-109)

Another character in the novel is Zoya's mother, a very calm lady 90 years old. Abdul introduces her as Zoya's mother. She has thick eyebrows spangled with silver. Her voice is strong and confident in her ideas. She spoke to Shalini in Urdu. She shared with Shalini about her grandson and his disappearance. She is happy to see Shalini, someone young who brought joy to their house. Similarly, she is able to know about Ishfaq. Madhuri explains:

"My Grandson," she said, "is also dead." ... The old lady glanced around with a contemptuous amusement on her face. "What?" She asked. "Our guest has come from so far away, and we can't even tell her the truth about our Ishfaq?" ... still, I had to be sure. Aunty, I said, who is that? "Ishfaq?" she barely glanced down at me. "Ishfaq is my grandson. Zoya's son." (*The Far Field* 91)

She meets another lady Zarina, Zoya's friend. Zarina is surprised to know where Shalini is living. She tells Shalini that she is a lucky girl, staying with them, someone who knows everybody in the town. She gets too close and helps everybody, no matter who it is. Zarina starts to help Shalini by collecting old bills, pictures, and information about Ishfaq. She goes with Shalini to search for Ishfaq.

After leaving Abdul Latif's house, she goes to meet Bashir Ahmed's family. After climbing 4000 feet, she sees a woman in a village who has wrinkles on her face. She wears a scarf because it is cold. That woman is waiting for Shalini, but after seeing her face she does not read her face. It looks like being anesthetized by a surgeon. She is Bashir Ahmed's wife, Khadejah. She meets her as well as her daughter-in-law, Amina. This is the woman whose absence became an invisible presence with Bashir Ahmed all the time in Bangalore. The woman who used to take care of the household and used to bring grass into the house by cutting it. She always remains quite a caretaker of the family. She has done a lot to take care of her family. She hid her husband to save him from the Army. The army had already broken her husband's legs and made him physically disabled. She does not want the soldiers to come back and again try to kill him. she has faced a lot of challenges to stand her family. She does not want to send her son Imran away from her to distant places. She does not believe in outsiders.



Amina, the daughter-in-law of Bashir Ahmed kept her family together and stood with her family. She has opened herself up to Shalini and reveals everything. Whenever any Army personnel visits their house, she was the one who talked to them. She says that women are the primary supports of the family in Kashmir. She is one who always narrates stories to Shalini. She is very curious about listening to good things from the people they met and cared about. She asked Shalini about her mother's death. At that moment Shalini wanted to reveal everything to her, but she was unable to speak. It was a generous assessment for her.

All the women in *The Far Field* display qualities of strong personalities. Madhuri Vijay makes sure to churn them out as strong, resilient and wise unlike the feminine qualities of being vulnerable, conformists or restraint. All the women are strong on their own and are contributing to their families in very significant way. Kashmiri women in the novel, particularly play a significant role in their community along with their family.

### **Kashmir vis a vis the rest of India**

The condition of Kashmir is different from other parts of India. The military has been deployed everywhere in the valley. People feel terrified to see them. Reports of Indian forces committing human violation along with violence by terror groups have been frequent. Acts of terror against Kashmiri civilians, including extrajudicial killings, rapes, tortures, and disappearances have become a common experience for Kashmiris. During the insurgency period, people used to stay inside their houses at the time of curfew and did not come out, when it was lifted, then they would show up in the streets. During wartime, Kashmiris have been in a state of shock, everyone remained silent in their homes to save their lives. The government deployed police and army everywhere. Barricades and bunkers are deployed in front of important buildings, markets, schools, and colleges. The institutions are shut down frequently. The crowd is visible only at the bus stand of the city where tourists try to leave the valley as soon as possible, but there are no busses available there (Jafa, 141-164).

Children in Kashmir have difficulties and very few opportunities unlike those in other parts of the country who have opportunities and are progressive. They aim to become engineers and doctors or crack civil services exams. They can focus only on their studies. But for the children in Kashmir there are several challenges and difficulties. For them struggling on daily basis is a challenge, the institutions are shut down as emergency and there are not many opportunities for the students in Kashmir. Moreover, the continuous disturbance, disappearance of their family members, killings and violence add to mental trauma amongst the children.

It is seen from the personal narrative, how the common people of Kashmir have witnessed the cruel stages and dynamics of the conflict. Dr. M Ashraf Bhat in his article 'Memories of Kashmir: Past, Present and Hope' writes about the militancy. He divides the eras of militancy in three parts and shows its impact on the lives of women as follows:

- 1) Pre-militancy era
- 2) Militancy era
- 3) Post-militancy era

**1) Pre-militancy era:** - Everything was normal in the pre-military era, boys used to go back from school and used to play with the army men without arms who did some social service in the village during the camp. After seeing the red clouds in the sky, people started praying to God. They started to think that some incident is about to happen in this place or some corner of the world. (Bhat, 2)



**2) Militancy era:** - In the militancy era, people were stacked among the military people. After feeding food to one militant party, another came and later in the military assault at night during the night. They felt terrified about their future and life risks. People were too scared to go out and remained inside the house. It was extremely hard to survive, but some of them survived by moving out of the state for business. (Bhat, 3)

**3) Post-militancy era:** - In the post-military era, women were forced to come out of their houses to find their husbands and children who disappeared during the military raids. Some of them were killed and some of them disappeared. It was an exceedingly difficult period for women to handle and take care of the family. (Bhat, 10) This has continued to have an impact on the lives of people in the present times too.

## Hypothesizing Narrative and Memory:

To understand narrative and memory, we must understand the role of trauma on the Kashmiri population. Islamic insurgency had started in Kashmir around the late 1980's, society had to face a lot of difficulties during that time. Most people around that time exchanged their experiences orally by speaking to each other.

Memory is an important aspect of trauma. It refers to a person's capacity to reconstruct the past. Testimonies and literary works about trauma are by-products of memory. There are various types of recollections, like nostalgia for the past, sense of loss, disappointment and experiences of migration or killings. Kashmir's women are oppressed by terrible recollections that date back to their early years. They have been plagued by the thought of violence their entire lives.

The literature that is based on narrative and memory provides us with a framework from which we can learn more about women's roles in conflict. After internal conflicts and fragmentation, women in society had to go through extreme difficulties and trauma. Violence in a way has become an everyday routine. In Kashmir, various groups of women were constantly reminding themselves of how the conflict split them apart. There was a general outpouring of rage against the military among the women along with a spirit of cooperation. Their shared emotions kept them united, made them feel like they belonged, and brought them closer as a group.

Narrating their experiences, sometimes become healing for them. Using this narrative technique, it is understood how a storyteller tells a story. How the story's structure is provided by the narration and how the victim constructs the story by remembering it. It is a social construct of observing the storyteller's language, pauses, or false starts, at that time the narrator shares a lot of information (Franzosi, 1998). As we identify to understand the memories of traumatic events that shape the community. We refer to a particular incident from which we can know these histories. We frequently identify memories by the behaviors of women concerning their life history. Every person's life or memory is somehow connected. Thus, we tend to determine actions by locating the behaviors regarding the place, and their life history and telling how the social settings of the history should be taught where they belong. How to search for memories according to the place about the history of their life. Every part of a person's life is interconnected in some way (Connerton, 21).

Future generations must learn these tales for their grandparents to understand the past of their families and the strength of their legacy of survival. Similarly, Shalini's query about her mother connects the dots between her mother's relationship with Bashir Ahmed vis a vis



her father. There is a role that memory plays and for her, her survival is determined by her locating her mother's past. Similarly, Zoya or Abdul Latief life revolves around the memories of their son Ishfaq. Zoya always remained silent. They had removed all signs of their son in the house to forget him, but forgetting him is not possible. Zoya still has hope to be with her son. Later, Abdul introduced Shalini to Zoya's mother, 90 years old lady, a very strong and confident woman. She told everything about her grandson who was picked by the army and never returned home. That time Shalini started to know about their lone Ishfaq. Madhuri explains:

"My Grandson," she said, "is also dead." ... The old lady glanced around with a contemptuous amusement on her face. "What?" She asked. "Our guest has come from so far away, and we can't even tell her the truth about our Ishfaq?" ... still, I had to be sure. Aunt, I said, who is that? "Ishfaq?" she barely glanced down at me. "Ishfaq is my grandson. Zoya's son." (*The Far Field* 91)

When someone reminds you to narrate a story about your loved one whom you love the most. How does it feel like it? There is something new to learn from others when they keep recollecting old memories. Bashir Ahmed talked to Shalini after 11 straight years of coming back from Bangalore. That day Ahmed reminded her of the old decade matter when people had parties at night at Shalini's home. While narrating, Ahmed's hands were inching closer to one another and entwining for comfort. She observed his waxy brow develop a bed of sweat. That night Beti, your mother wanted to come to Kishtwar with me. He thought that matter would take the entire landscape around them. Firstly, Shalini could not imagine that her mother could do this thing. After listening, she started guessing that her mother wanted to walk these narrow stony paths, sit crouched beside the fire, feed the chickens, milk the cow, and sleep on the thin mattress. He made an effort to explain to Shalini's mother of impossibility, but she would not be in the mood to listen. He said all the scary and kind things the people faced in the village. She said she would go mad if he did not bring her, she would jump off the roof. She was not in the mood to listen to anything from Ahmed. Ahmed said that her father had been very kind to him and you were just a child. Beti, I decided to leave your house alone to make it better for your family and your relatives. Bashir speaks:

"Beti, your mother..." I did not help her.... "Where did she want to go?" I asked. Confusion flickered on his face. "What do you mean?" The night of the party. She wanted to leave with you, right? Where did she want to go?" ... "so, you left," I finished for him. "You left us behind." (*The Far Field*, 350-351)

Memories are a part of everyone's life in the novel. The Brigadier too shares his story, he talked about his father's and mother's death. By telling his story to Shalini he felt relaxed. He also tells why his father threw himself out of the ship when his father's ship was a hundred kilometers off the coast of Myanmar. His father committed suicide at an age of thirty-eight. His father's death burned his mother from the inside, so she consumed poison. He never told this to anyone except Shalini:



It's a damaged thing, I know. My father committed suicide when I was twelve." I looked up, all of a sudden short of breath. "Your father" ... "my mother was forty-five," was all I could say... "She took poison," I said. "It Burned her up from the inside. I've never told anyone else. (*The Far Field*, 394)

These above quotations show that memory is critical. According to historian Hayden White (1981), "Historical events are not real because they occurred, but rather because they were first thought to be important enough to recall and narrate, leading to their natural placement in a chronological order of events." (White, 45-46)

For instance, a person might just recall significant life events from memory these images cast an impression on the mind and reoccur at various trigger points. The memories are store-houses of the past event and the individual memories become collective memories of the community.

### **Formation of individual and Collective Memory:**

Remembering and talking about your history breaks the code of silence. It is the point at which someone discovers for the first time about something that happened in the past. The themes of collective memory are remembering, sharing, healing, and reconnecting. The guiding principles of this particular vision are "moving away from feeling, thinking, and acting as a victim, to feeling, thinking, and acting as a survivor" (Silence, 131). As Judith Harman says about the survivors "survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their tragedy by using it as the basis for social action. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes a source of survivor mission" (Herman, 207).

The narrator first travels to the mountain of Kishtwar. After she reaches there, she finds the difficulties faced by the locals there. Her work also mourns the loss Kashmiris have faced for the last three decades. People, especially the young generation, face the trauma of disappearance throughout the valley. The author faces a significant task in getting his point across through this method.

People constantly seek out the past while engaging with one another because the past and the present are inextricably linked. We know collective memory has various forms, such forms are commemoration, monuments, controversy, strategic use of the past, and even political or recollection of the personal experience.

Olick and Robbins quote Foucault that "memory is an important factor in the struggle if one learns to control one's memory, one controls their dynamism". Then they write about how the groups engage themselves in these activities so that they can remember the history. For example, people celebrate Martyrs Day in Kashmir, enchanting with excitement in the streets and prize those who laid their lives by attributing heroic acts. Although, the absence of courage in every single place in Kashmir. In Kashmir people go out in the streets and remember martyrs by reciting verses from the holy Scriptures and chanting slogans. Women also help men for doing that. It's a procedure of recalling and keeping memories alive. The storyteller aims to create and maintain individual and group identities to maintain unity in a community. They use special tools to recollect old memories, but their important tool is memory among other tools.





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Matlin writes about memory:

It is a process in which information is maintained for a brief period. (Matlin. 2005, 3)

And Sternberg says:

Memory is the process by which we draw out past experiences into the present. (Sternberg, 1999)

In drawing past experiences in psychology, we called it 'remembering'. It is different from 'forgetting'.

In her novel, *The Far Field*, Madhuri Vijay travels keeping her mother's memories alive in her thoughts. She still remembers everything from when she was six years old. She knew when Bashir Ahmed them.

Madhuri, through his imaginative articulation, has attempted to remember the unforgettable recollections of Shalini's disorganized occasions while traveling from one place to another place. Madhuri, In, *The Far Field* has tended to this issue of disappearance, memories, and political realities. Her novel draws an incredible work of showing each character's feelings and offering a brief examination of existence that are broken in the historical circumstances of the incredible disturbance of Kashmir as well as Shalini's mother.

## Conclusion

Madhuri Vijay's *The Far Field* presents a compelling narrative intervention into the literary representations of Kashmir by foregrounding memory, trauma, and women's lived experiences within a militarized conflict zone. Through the perspective of an outsider protagonist, the novel interrogates the ethics of witnessing, the politics of representation, and the limitations of empathetic engagement when confronted with histories of violence that are not one's own. Rather than offering closure or resolution, Vijay's narrative emphasizes fragmentation, silence, and the persistence of unresolved grief, thereby resisting dominant linear or nationalist accounts of conflict. This article has argued that women in *The Far Field* occupy a central narrative and ethical position, not merely as victims of political violence but as bearers of memory and quiet resistance. Their stories reveal how trauma is transmitted through everyday life, domestic spaces, and interpersonal relationships, transforming memory into a cultural archive that challenges historical erasure. The outsider's gaze, instead of appropriating local suffering, is gradually unsettled, exposing the uneven power relations between observer and observed, centre and margin, safety and precarity. By situating *The Far Field* within the broader framework of postcolonial and cultural studies, this study demonstrates how contemporary Indian English fiction engages with contested spaces through intimate, gendered narratives. Vijay's novel ultimately redefines conflict literature by shifting attention from spectacle and ideology to affect, silence, and ethical responsibility. In doing so, *The Far Field* contributes to an emerging body of literature that insists on reading political violence through the fragile yet resilient memories of women, thereby reaffirming literature's role in preserving suppressed histories and fostering critical reflection.



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