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SILENCE AND VIOLENCE: THE LANGUAGE OF TRAUMA IN PARO ANAND'S NO GUNS AT MY SON'S FUNERAL

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Keywords	***Abstract***
Trauma, Kashmir conflict, silence, violence, adolescence, radicalization, young adult fiction.	The conflict in Kashmir has been a long-standing one due to several political, historical and geographical reasons that have led to myriad experiences of displacement, forced migration, militancy and violence in the Valley. Further, these experiences have generated a rich body of literary and cultural production that bears witness to its devastating human costs. It is within this tradition that Paro Anand's young adult novel *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* (2005) occupies a distinctive and critically underexplored position, narrating the seduction and destruction of adolescent identity in the crucible of militancy. This paper argues that Anand's novel deploys silence and violence not merely as thematic concerns but demonstrates how conventional channels of communication collapse under the weight of sustained, unacknowledged trauma. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly the works of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and Dominick LaCapra, the paper examines how the novel's central characters inhabit a world in which

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	speech has been fatally compromised, truth is encrypted beneath social performance, and violence has become the primary language of political and emotional expression. The paper contends that *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* is not only a novel about trauma but a traumatic text, one that makes its readers witnesses to a culture of silence and violence that consumes its young and most vulnerable members.

Paro Anand's *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* (2025) stands out as a very touching novel that bears witness to the eruption of armed militancy in Kashmir of the 1990s and focuses on the specific vulnerability of adolescents in the conflict zone. Written for young adult readers and psychologically insightful, the novel traces the gradual radicalization of Aftab, a Kashmiri teenager drawn into a militant group led by the charismatic and deeply manipulative Akram. The novel's title announces its central preoccupation at the outset: guns do not belong at funerals, but when they appear, they signal a world in which peace and guns cannot coexist, and that the divide between life and death is so thin. The young and the vulnerable tend to easily get sucked into the world of violence.

This paper seeks to explore how Anand's novel constructs and conveys trauma through the intertwined registers of silence and violence. It argues that within the familiar world of the family, communication often skirts the issue of violence. Though not addressed directly, it is clear that Aftab's mother would never want the young boys to be drawn into the world of violence, especially when living in a conflict zone and being aware of the consequences of militancy and violence. In its place, silence and violence function as the dominant modes of expression: characters communicate through what they cannot bring themselves to say, and meaning is made not through words but through strategic withholding. Drawing on trauma theory and postcolonial criticism, this analysis examines how this collapse of language operates at both the thematic and the formal level of the text, and what it means for the novel's young protagonist, Aftab, and the reader who witnesses his fate. As Cathy Caruth argues, trauma is defined above all by its resistance to direct representation: the traumatic event "claims us precisely at the moment it is not fully grasped" (4). Anand's novel, takes that intangible and impalpable aspect, a foreboding and an apprehension of the consequences of violence as its very subject.

The study of trauma in literature has been shaped by a convergence of psychoanalytic, historical, and postcolonial critical traditions. In her landmark study *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth argues that trauma is defined by its belatedness and its resistance to direct representation: the traumatic event is not fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence but returns unbidden in the form of flashbacks, repetitions, and narrative gaps. "The history of a trauma, in its inherent latency," she writes, "is never simply one's own" (8). Literature is therefore a privileged medium for transmitting traumatic experience, because it can enact, rather than merely describe, the fragmentary and belated structures of traumatic memory.

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To situate Anand's narrative, it is necessary to briefly sketch the historical and political context from which it emerges. The Kashmir conflict has its origins in the unresolved partition of British India in 1947, when Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, acceded to India following a tribal invasion backed by Pakistan. The first Indo-Pakistani war established the Line of Control (LoC) that divides the region to this day, but the underlying questions of sovereignty and self-determination remained unresolved. By the late 1980s, a volatile convergence of political repression, electoral manipulation, economic stagnation, and the rise of Islamist militancy—actively supported by Pakistan in the aftermath of the Afghan jihad—created the conditions for armed insurgency. The uprising that erupted in 1989–90 was characterized by widespread violence against civilians, massive Indian military deployment, and the displacement of multiple communities, producing what Sumantra Bose has described as "a catastrophic rupture in the social fabric of the Valley" (57).

It is in this context of catastrophic rupture that Anand sets her novel. Aftab inhabits a world in which the rhythms of ordinary adolescent life—school, friendship, cricket, family meals—are constantly disrupted and distorted by the logic of conflict. The city of Baramullah, where much of the action unfolds, is a space in which the domestic and the martial are inextricably intertwined. And into this world of suspended normalcy steps Akram, articulating with cold precision the predatory logic of militant recruitment: "One should never wait till these new recruits are old enough to start thinking for themselves. Then they lose courage once they know the dangers ahead of them. You have to use them while their dreams are bigger than their knowledge" (Anand 8-9). This chilling formulation identifies the precise vulnerability that violence seeks to exploit: the gap between adolescent aspiration and lived reality, the space of dream that has not yet been occupied by knowledge and its attendant fear.

In the novel, violence is also articulated by a silence around it. In the novel, the characters most deeply marked by traumatic knowledge are precisely those whose speech is most constrained and oblique. Paro Anand suggests throughout that trauma does not necessarily produce speech but rather the suppression of speech. Those who know the most are, paradoxically, those who are least able to say what they know directly. Aftab's mother is the most powerful embodiment of traumatic silence. She consistently expresses her knowledge of the conflict's violence through prohibition, repetition, and the language of the body and the home. In a significant scene, she articulates to Aftab the world she has lost and the dangers she perceives, her words moving between the personal and the historical:

> There was a time when we were just Kashmiris. And that was enough. More than enough. We shared each other's food, danced at each other's festivals, wept at each other's sorrows. Religion did not matter, you just leaned on the nearest shoulder, wept

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> on it, if you needed to… Now only death lurks. Not in dark corners, but in the open streets, in broad daylight. I wish it could be like the old days again. (Anand 17)

This passage reveals her knowledge about violence and trauma but she can only speak of loss and longing, she cannot communicate the full depth of her terror directly to her son. The speech—nostalgic, circular, returns compulsively to the image of communal wholeness which has precisely the belated, repetitive quality that Caruth identifies as characteristic of traumatic expression (23). She knows Aftab is being recruited, that she has watched other mothers lose their sons, that she lives in daily anticipation of catastrophe, but she does not state this directly; she says it obliquely, through a language of memory and warning that Aftab systematically refuses to hear. Her most explicit articulation of her absolute boundary is equally an act of encoded speech: "Hands that had cradled a killing gun would never rock her grandchild, she had promised. She could say all she wanted to, no one would listen to her words and warnings until later. Much later" (Anand 11). The narrator's chilling interjection—"until later. Much later"—is itself a hint of the traumatic events that are to unfold and, that the mother's speech is unable to prevent. Judith Herman's foundational clinical study, Trauma and Recovery, foregrounds the ways in which trauma disrupts the capacity for narrative coherence, producing in survivors a compulsion to either compulsively repeat or absolutely silence their experience. "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud," Herman observes, "is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (9). This dialectic—between speaking and silence, proclamation and suppression—is structurally central to Anand's novel, in which every character is caught between the imperative to testify and the impossibility of doing so.

Aftab's systematic misreading of his mother's silence is one of the novel's most sustained and painful ironies. Rather than receiving her encoded knowledge as a sliver of wisdom of traumatic experience, he instead scans her speech and behaviour for "soft spots, vulnerabilities" (Anand 12-13) as per the training he has received from Akram, which he can exploit to neutralize her resistance. In a deeply disturbing scene, Aftab uses a moment of maternal tenderness—his mother cradling his head in her lap after his father has beaten him—to extract the freedom to continue his militant activities:

> 'Ammi, Ammi, Ammi,' smiled Aftab, stroking her head as it rested on his broadening shoulder, 'Ammi, what I do, where I go, I can't tell you anything, but see, you must believe me. What we're doing, it's for the good of all of us. Yours, Abbu's, Shazia Aapa's, mine—but most of all, for the good of the little ones, like Amir.' (Anand 18)

The scene is devastating in its revelation of how completely the logic of the militant cell has colonized Aftab's emotional life. Even the most intimate act of maternal care has been transformed into an opportunity for manipulation. The family home, which should be the site of care, education, and the transmission of communal knowledge, has been breached by the logic of the conflict; the domestic and the military have become indistinguishable.

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The novel's chapter headings enact at the formal level the same structure of traumatic speech that the thematic content describes. Taking the form of syntactically incomplete, half-articulated phrases—"He was not alone, sir. Not alone…"; "Get back home and just deny everything…"; "Faster and faster it went out of control"—these headings do not summarize but rather interrupt, trailing off into ellipsis, hinting at meanings that cannot be completed. The architecture of the novel is thus organized around a principle of incompletion and suppression. The text itself refuses to speak fully and instead formally enacts the condition of its characters and its world. Dominick LaCapra cautions that "markedly performative kind of writing can be risky -at least insofar as it is not automatized and assimilated in mimetic fashion as an all-purpose methodology that predictably privileges excess, incalculability, the transgression of limits, (self) shattering, unbound or associative play, and so forth" (105). But Paro Anand's chapter headings suggest a slow mutedness.

If silence is one register of trauma in *No Guns at My Son's Funeral*, violence is the other—and the novel is acutely attentive to the ways in which political violence functions as a substitute language: a system of signs through which identity, power, and meaning are communicated in the absence of more legitimate expressive modes. For Akram and his cell, violence is not merely instrumental but expressive and performative: it produces spectacle, and spectacle is the currency of political communication in a world where other forms of speech have been foreclosed by occupation and repression. As Feroze explains to the assembled recruits, their next operation must be "high profile" because "the big outfits have been hogging all the newspaper headlines… frankly, we're getting sidelined" (Anand 28). Violence, here, is described as competing for discursive space: its purpose is not political transformation but visibility.

Akram is able to sway Aftab with his rhetoric. His power over Aftab derives not from physical force but from his extraordinary capacity to organize meaning and produce desire through language. He understands, with the precision of a manipulator, that language itself can be a form of violence—that praise and withholding, inclusion and exclusion, can bind a young man to a cause more effectively than any explicit coercion. After a meeting in which Aftab has failed to contribute any ideas, Akram offers him a morsel of coded approval:

> 'Sometimes it is wisest to hold one's tongue than blabber on when you have nothing to say.' Aftab glowed. He was part of the inner circle. He was sharing a joke with the seniors. He. Not Imran, not Javed. He. He grinned happily and went on his way whistling. (Anand 29)

The passage exemplifies the rhetoric of manipulation. Akram's praise is simultaneously an instruction in the value of silence as well as a reinforcement of hierarchy, and a reward for compliance. It produces in Aftab precisely the elation and sense of belonging that he has been seeking. The "He," repeated in the narrator's free indirect rendering of Aftab's inner state, enacts the inflated ego that Akram's rhetoric achieves. Homi K. Bhabha has written of the ways in which

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colonial discourse produces its subjects through a language of recognition and exclusion that oscillates between affirmation and denigration (96); Akram's rhetoric operates through a precisely analogous mechanism, constructing Aftab's identity by alternately granting and withholding recognition.

The novel is also deeply attentive to the ways in which violence is aestheticized in Aftab's imagination through the mediation of popular Hindi cinema. His vision of Akram is consistently filtered through Bollywood iconography:

> He felt like a big hero in the films. Like Hrithik Roshan in *Fiza.* He could easily picture Akram in that role. Cloaked in black, green eyes blazing out at those who hurt him. AK-47 in his powerful arms. Muscles rippling, jaws clenched, he could mow down a platoon of soldiers all by himself. Aftab tried to picture himself in a similar scene. But when the blood started to spurt, his stomach churned. (Anand 5)

This passage is the novel's most explicit diagnosis of the cultural machinery through which young men are prepared for violence. The fantasy of militant heroism has been pre-formed by the media, which supplies Aftab with a ready-made script of masculine sacrifice and glory. Yet the fantasy immediately encounters its limit: the blood. Aftab's churning stomach is the body's residual refusal of the script his mind has been taught to desire. As van der Kolk demonstrates, the body registers truths that the mind has been conditioned to suppress; the somatic aversion to blood is the physiological expression of a self not yet fully colonized by the logic of violence (89).

The story of Akram past, revealed in a long retrospective passage, highlights the novel's concern with violence as language. As a young recruit, Akram carried out a bombing in a crowded bazaar, killing innocent civilians. Rather than being praised, he was publicly humiliated by his superiors:

> A stinging slap across the face. Then a bunched fist hits him on his mouth, leaving a chipped tooth and a broken nose. And the taste of blood… Long after the Sting of a slap. Sings the sting of shame… 'Coward! You've killed women and children.' The words whip worse than the hands. (Anand 59)

In LaCapra's terms, the Kashmir Azadi Group that Akram subsequently founds is not a political organization but an "acting out" of unresolved traumatic shame (89): its violence is driven not by ideology but by the compulsive need to redeem a wounded narcissism. "Eternity would know him," the narrator tells us. "Would recognize him… They might admire him or revile him. But never, never again would they ignore him, humiliate him" (Anand 61). The novel thus reveals that the violence which consumes Aftab originates not in political grievance but in one man's unhealed trauma, cyclically reproduced through the recruitment and destruction of vulnerable young boys.

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A striking dimension of Anand's narrative is the degree to which trauma is registered in and through the body. The body becomes the text on which the history of violence is inscribed. In a world where verbal language has been compromised, the body becomes an archive of experience. Feroze's trembling hands are perhaps the novel's most compelling example of embodied testimony. They register, involuntarily, an experience of violence that cannot be spoken:

> Aftab noticed that Javed was staring at Feroze's trembling hands as they quietened in his lap. Akram noticed too and clucked in irritation. He was extremely protective of Feroze and knew that Feroze was self-conscious about his infirmity. Aftab wondered what had happened to make him so shaky. There were lots of stories, but there was no way of knowing which one was true. (Anand 5)

Feroze's shaking hands are, in van der Kolk's terms, "a physical symptom of unprocessed trauma" (45)—a somatic record of the torture he suffered as a twelve-year-old boy in army custody, an experience rendered in the novel's retrospective account with understated horror: "They caught him. They brought him back to the camp and they—they—they brutalized him… They broke his bones. They almost bled him to death" (Anand 28). The stutter in Akram's speech—the triple repetition of "they"—formally enacts the traumatic difficulty of articulating what was done to a child's body. Feroze's hands continue to shake because the trauma they record has never been spoken, witnessed, or processed. The body keeps the score when language refuses to.

Akram's body tells a very different and more deeply ironic story. The scar running "from the hairline to the right eyebrow" is interpreted by Aftab not as evidence of suffering but as a sign of heroic distinction:

> The gash that ran from the hairline to the right eyebrow was etched deep. On anyone else it would have been disfiguring. But on Akram, Aftab thought, it looked so grand. It added to his aura of a dashing warrior. Aftab could only see perfection when he looked at Akram. And he never looked deep enough to see the cracks, the imperfections that festered below. (Anand 4)

The narrator comments "Aftab could only see perfection when he looked at Akram. And he never looked deep enough to see the cracks, the imperfections that festered below" (5) reveals Aftab's vulnerability and innocence in not being able to see through Akram's scar. Aftab's inability to read Akram's body truthfully, and instead see in the scar a wound rather than a medal, shows the extent of his entrapment within the aesthetics of militant heroism. Aftab being at an impressionable age, reads the signs on Akram's body as he does through his Bollywood lens as proof of glory. As LaCapra argues, the aestheticization of violence is one of the most insidious effects of traumatic culture: it transforms suffering into spectacle and prevents the genuine working-through that healing requires (30).

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Aftab's own body appears to be a complex and poignant archive of truth. He is barely able to see blood and has an aversion to it. He vomits on seeing the goat's slaughter on Bakr Id. Also, his dizziness at violent fantasy, and in a compulsive hand-to-temples gesture whenever imagination reaches its bloody limit demonstrates the body's resistance to the narrative of heroism imposed upon him. In a particularly resonant moment, just as his imagination reaches the climax of militant fantasy, "in his mind's eye, the blood flowed—the blood of their kill. Aftab put his hands to his temples to keep his head from swimming at the thought of so much blood" (Anand 21). This gesture—hands to temples, physically trying to contain an unbearable image—is a somatic refusal of the fantasy, a bodily testimony to a self that has not yet been fully consumed. The body, in Anand's novel, is the last refuge of a truth that language has been made unable to speak.

Gender is a crucial dimension of the novel's construction of trauma and silence. In the world of *No Guns at My Son's Funeral*, women's speech is systematically marginalized and overridden, even as women are shown to possess the most accurate and comprehensive understanding of the conflict and its dangers. Aftab's mother's warnings are dismissed as nagging and sentimentality; his sister Shazia's growing quietness is attributed to female "preoccupations" that Aftab has "no time to worry about" (Anand 11). The novel is acutely attentive to the gendered distribution of knowledge and the capacity for speech: women know, but are structurally prevented from being heard; men speak, but what they say is shaped by a logic of conflict that progressively silences everything else.

Yet women's silence in the novel is not the silence of ignorance or passivity. Shazia, in particular, is shown to possess a clear-eyed political intelligence that far surpasses her brother's militant romanticism. When Aftab is questioned by army officer Major Ramneeq, it is Shazia who devises the cover story, understands the logic of surveillance, and correctly predicts that the army will use Aftab as a lead: "The army's not stupid, you know. He's got a lead, don't you see? You're his lead. He's going to be back… they're going to try to recruit you to help them catch the militant" (Anand 50). Shazia's speech is tactical, precise, and strategically effective—everything that Aftab's militant fantasies are not. But it is delivered in a hiss, through a crack in a doorway, in a subdued voice and manner.

Anand, in the novel, brings out how women, despite being a repository of memories as well as a witness to violence, often are unable to effectively communicate within patriarchal structures. Aftab's mother's knowledge, accumulated through years of watching, listening, and surviving, is encoded in her prohibitions and her nostalgic laments, but it is not transmitted to her son because the patriarchal structures that organize their relationship ensure that her speech is not be heard as authoritative. Her silence, when she finally turns her back on Aftab and refuses to bring him his morning tea, is not the silence of powerlessness but of a woman who has exhausted the resources of direct speech and retreated into a form of embodied protest.

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No Guns at My Son's Funeral thus deploys silence and violence as the twin registers of trauma. The novel constructs a world in which conventional language has been systematically hollowed out: words no longer mean what they say; silence becomes more articulate than speech; and violence has become the dominant medium through which identity, belonging, and meaning are sought and, ultimately, destroyed. In this world, the young are the most vulnerable precisely because they are the most open to the seductions of a discourse that promises to fill the gap between their dreams and their knowledge.

The traumatic conditions Anand describes in the novel are enacted through the text's formal choices. Some of the fragmented chapter headings trail off into ellipses or half-statements, formally mirroring the structure of traumatic speech that Herman identifies as its defining feature. (9) The oscillation between domestic warmth and sudden, shattering violence creates the precise affective rhythm of life in a conflict zone—the normalcy that is always already shadowed by catastrophe. In all of these ways, the novel does not merely represent trauma but, in Laub's sense, "bears witness" to it—it creates the conditions for a hearing that the characters themselves cannot find (Felman and Laub 70).

The novel, thus reveals a cycle of trauma that reproduces itself across generations. Akram's violence is the acting out of his own unhealed wound, and Aftab's radicalization is the direct consequence of that acting out; and the cycle would continue. Anand suggests that the cycle would continue until someone finds a way to speak the truth that has been suppressed—to witness what has been done, to mourn what has been lost, and to refuse the seductive grammar of the gun. Anand's novel, in its careful attention to the failure of language and the body's desperate attempts to compensate for that failure, suggests that the path from violence to peace runs through the difficult and dangerous territory of truthful speech.

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