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Narratives of Therapy and Trauma: Representations of Mental Health in Contemporary Pakistani Fiction



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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction represents trauma, therapy, repression, and healing, focusing on Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God*, Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*, and Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*. Using trauma theory (Cathy Caruth; Dominick LaCapra) alongside psychological criticism, the study asks whether these novels normalize clinical therapy, treat it with suspicion, or refigure therapeutic practice in culturally specific ways. Through close readings and comparative thematic analysis, I show that formal strategies—silence and fragmentation in Khan, dystopian collectivities in Shah, and satire in Hanif—function as alternative modalities of psychic negotiation. Rather than foregrounding institutional psychiatry, the texts stage therapy as (1) protective silence that doubles as psychic injury; (2) clandestine relational practices that approximate working-through; and (3) humor and parody that operate as communal coping mechanisms. The paper argues that while Caruth's notion of belated trauma and LaCapra's acting-out/working-through remain analytically useful, they require cultural calibration: testimony and clinical recovery are not universally available or desirable in contexts marked by stigma, honor politics, and authoritarian risk. By situating these novels within both global trauma studies and Pakistan's socio-cultural landscape, the study contributes a pluralistic framework for reading literary therapies—one that recognizes silence, solidarity, and satire as legitimate, politically inflected forms of healing. The paper concludes with suggestions for interdisciplinary work linking literary analysis to culturally sensitive mental-health practice.

Introduction

The conversation around mental health has undergone a visible transformation in contemporary South Asia, especially in Pakistan, where issues of trauma, therapy, and psychological well-being are slowly entering public discourse. For decades, mental illness in Pakistan was relegated to the margins, couched in silence or cloaked in cultural stigma, frequently associated with supernatural explanations or moral failings rather than recognized as conditions requiring care. However, the twenty-first century has witnessed a cautious yet perceptible shift. Urban spaces, digital platforms, and

emerging activist voices are making therapy and mental health more discussable, though not without resistance from deeply ingrained cultural norms. Fiction, as both mirror and molder of social realities, has begun to capture this changing landscape. Pakistani Anglophone writers, in particular, are exploring how trauma—whether historical, political, or gendered—intersects with the personal psyche and how therapy or its absence becomes central to understanding survival and healing in fractured societies.

Within this context, three novels stand out as significant literary interventions: Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2008), Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018), and Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008). Each of these works addresses the question of how trauma operates in Pakistani society, not as an isolated psychological burden but as a collective phenomenon shaped by repression, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and sociopolitical silences. In *The Geometry of God*, Khan foregrounds suppressed traumas and silenced voices, mapping the intimate cost of religious dogma and political control. Bina Shah's dystopian *Before She Sleeps* projects into a speculative future where women's bodies and minds are policed, making visible the psychological pressure and covert forms of resistance under authoritarian gender regimes. Meanwhile, Hanif's satirical *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* uses dark humor to narrate trauma in the register of paranoia, repression, and absurdity, thereby reframing grief and violence through irony rather than confession. Taken together, these texts pose critical questions about how Pakistani fiction imagines therapy, trauma, repression, and the possibility—or impossibility—of healing.

Problem Statement and Research Gap

While trauma studies have been extensively applied to Euro-American contexts—particularly in relation to the Holocaust, slavery, or post-9/11 wars—South Asian trauma narratives remain underexplored in Anglophone literary criticism. Existing scholarship on Pakistani fiction has focused heavily on postcolonial identity, Islamophobia, or gender, often sidelining the psychological and affective registers through which individuals experience structural violence. Moreover, when trauma is addressed in Pakistani cultural studies, it is frequently reduced to journalistic accounts of terrorism or state violence, leaving unexamined the subtler ways literature grapples

with interior wounds, silenced grief, and the contested role of therapy. There is a research gap, therefore, in understanding how Pakistani Anglophone novels construct trauma not only as the aftershock of political repression but also as a narrative space where therapy, repression, and healing are negotiated.

By focusing on these three novels, this study addresses this gap by asking: What narrative strategies do Pakistani authors employ to represent trauma? Do these representations normalize therapy as a legitimate mode of healing, or do they reinforce suspicion toward it as a “Western” intrusion? How do satire, dystopia, and fragmented narration shape the understanding of trauma’s unspeakability? And finally, what do these fictional engagements reveal about the larger cultural negotiations around mental health in Pakistan?

Research Questions and Objectives

This study is guided by the following key questions:

1. How do *The Geometry of God*, *Before She Sleeps*, and *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* represent trauma, repression, and the psychological consequences of sociopolitical violence?
2. In what ways do these novels portray therapy—whether explicitly through medicalized interventions or implicitly through alternative forms of storytelling, silence, or satire—as a mode of negotiating trauma?
3. To what extent do these texts normalize, critique, or resist the discourse of therapy within Pakistani cultural frameworks where stigma around mental illness persists?
4. How can trauma theory (Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra) and psychological criticism illuminate the narrative forms through which Pakistani fiction represents wounds, memory, and recovery?

The objective is to analyze how Pakistani Anglophone fiction participates in global conversations on trauma literature while also producing culturally specific articulations of repression and healing. In doing so, this research hopes to situate Pakistani novels within the larger field of trauma studies and world literature.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to literary criticism in several ways. First, it expands the application of trauma theory to South Asian fiction, showing how Pakistani literature

complicates Eurocentric models of trauma that often presuppose individualized, clinical therapy as the primary mode of healing. By examining how Pakistani texts resist or adapt these frameworks, the research challenges the dominance of Western psychiatric paradigms and foregrounds alternative modes of collective resilience, satire, or silence as forms of coping. Second, the project addresses the urgent cultural issue of mental health in Pakistan. By exploring how novels narrate trauma in a society where therapy remains stigmatized, the study highlights fiction's role in normalizing discussions around psychological suffering and offering imaginative spaces for empathy. Finally, in bridging literary analysis with psychological criticism, the research demonstrates how narrative form itself—whether fragmented, dystopian, or satirical—becomes a therapeutic act, allowing writers to work through the impossibility of directly representing trauma.

For Pakistani literary studies, the significance is even sharper. Fiction here is not merely aesthetic but deeply political, revealing how repression under authoritarian regimes, religious conservatism, and patriarchal control leaves scars that cannot be publicly spoken. To study trauma and therapy in this fiction is, therefore, to study the very structures of silence and resistance in Pakistani society. By centering Pakistani Anglophone novels in trauma studies, this research decenters Euro-American trauma narratives and affirms the plurality of global trauma literatures.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a combination of **psychological criticism** and **trauma theory**. Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as an unassimilated event that returns belatedly through haunting, and Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through," provide the critical foundation. These frameworks help analyze how Pakistani novels stage trauma as both personal wound and collective history, as both silence and narrative excess. Psychological criticism further assists in interpreting character psyches, repression, and the ambivalent presence of therapy within the texts.

In addition, the analysis is attentive to narrative strategies. For instance, the fragmented voices in *The Geometry of God* reveal how trauma disperses identity and memory; the dystopian register in *Before She Sleeps* dramatizes the claustrophobic psychic pressures of patriarchal control; while satire in *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*

destabilizes the solemnity of trauma by reframing it in absurdist humor. Together, these narrative forms embody trauma's paradox: it resists representation, yet it demands articulation.

While the primary theoretical lens will be trauma theory, the study remains open to intersections with **feminist criticism** (particularly in analyzing Shah's novel) and **postcolonial theory** (in understanding how Pakistani trauma narratives negotiate Western frameworks of therapy). This multi-pronged methodology ensures a comprehensive and critical engagement with the texts.

In sum, the introduction frames the central argument: contemporary Pakistani fiction is actively narrating trauma and repression in ways that question the place of therapy within a culturally stigmatized environment. Through different narrative modes—fragmentation, dystopia, satire—these novels not only represent trauma but also test the limits of healing, whether through silence, resistance, or laughter. This study thus situates Pakistani Anglophone novels at the intersection of literature, psychology, and cultural politics, arguing that they provide indispensable insights into the evolving discourse of mental health in South Asia.

Literature Review

Trauma and Therapy in Global Literary Studies

Trauma has long been a preoccupation of literary scholarship, particularly in the wake of the twentieth century's wars, genocides, and displacements. Foundational figures such as **Cathy Caruth (1996)** argue that trauma is not simply an event but an unassimilated experience that returns in fragments, haunting memory and narrative. Caruth emphasizes the belatedness of trauma—its deferred representation and repetition—while **Dominick LaCapra (2001)** distinguishes between “acting out” (a compulsive return of traumatic memory) and “working through” (a critical, therapeutic engagement with it). These frameworks have shaped a global scholarly consensus: trauma resists representation, yet literature often becomes the medium where the unspeakable acquires form.

In Euro-American contexts, trauma studies have extensively analyzed Holocaust literature, African American slavery narratives, and post-9/11 fiction. Here, therapy is frequently framed as a process of remembering, narrating, and integrating traumatic experiences into coherent identity. **Dori Laub's psychoanalytic studies**

(1995) and Shoshana Felman's work (1992) link testimony to survival, suggesting that storytelling itself can be therapeutic. Yet critics such as E. Ann Kaplan (2005) and Michael Rothberg (2009) caution against universalizing trauma theory, warning that Eurocentric models may not fully account for cultural variations in how trauma is understood, expressed, or healed.

This caution is especially relevant when turning to South Asian literatures, where colonial violence, Partition, authoritarian regimes, and gendered oppression have created collective traumas that do not neatly align with Western psychiatric frameworks. Therapy, in such contexts, is often not individualized or clinical but negotiated through silence, satire, storytelling, or communal rituals. Pakistani fiction in English, therefore, provides a fertile but underexplored ground for analyzing how trauma is narrated and how therapy—or suspicion toward therapy—enters cultural imagination.

Trauma, Silence, and Suppression in Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God*

Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* has been studied primarily through the lens of **science versus religion, postcolonial identity, and feminist resistance**. Scholars such as Claire Chambers (2011) read the novel as a critique of religious authoritarianism, where women's voices are systematically silenced. The trauma of suppression here is not spectacular but quotidian: the steady erasure of intellectual freedom and bodily autonomy.

However, critical work on the novel rarely foregrounds the psychological costs of such repression. While Anshuman Mondal (2013) briefly notes that Khan's fragmented narrative structure mirrors fractured subjectivity, few critics extend this into a sustained analysis of trauma. The silence of the female characters, their internalized fear, and the absence of therapeutic outlets remain underexplored. The novel, in fact, dramatizes what LaCapra calls "acting out": characters repeat silence, self-censorship, and avoidance rather than openly "working through" trauma.

This research, therefore, identifies a gap: while existing criticism situates *The Geometry of God* in debates about Islam, science, and gender politics, it has not sufficiently analyzed the novel's representation of suppressed traumas as psychological wounds that demand but resist therapy. Examining Khan's narrative through trauma theory allows us to understand silence itself as a narrative form of

repression, complicating the idea that therapy must always entail speech.

Dystopia, Gender, and Psychological Pressure in Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*

Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* has attracted attention largely in feminist and dystopian studies. Critics such as **Maria-Sofia Pimenta (2020)** situate the novel within global dystopian traditions, likening it to *The Handmaid's Tale* for its portrayal of authoritarian control over women's reproductive roles. Shah herself, in interviews, has acknowledged Margaret Atwood's influence but insists her dystopia is grounded in the lived experiences of Pakistani women under patriarchal structures.

Scholarship has tended to highlight the novel's gender politics rather than its psychological implications. For example, **Shaista Patel (2021)** interprets Shah's text as a critique of state-imposed biopolitics, while **Sadaf Ahmad (2022)** underscores its feminist resistance. Yet the novel's detailed depiction of women's claustrophobia, paranoia, and psychological fatigue under constant surveillance has not been fully explored as a representation of trauma. The women in *Before She Sleeps* form secret collectives where emotional sharing becomes a surrogate therapy, an alternative to clinical psychiatry, which is conspicuously absent in the dystopian world.

This raises critical questions: Does Shah normalize collective, non-medical forms of therapy, or does she highlight their insufficiency in the absence of institutional mental health support? Trauma theory helps illuminate how dystopian fiction foregrounds psychological repression not as an individual pathology but as a structural condition of gendered subjugation. This study, therefore, expands existing feminist readings by integrating trauma criticism, showing how Shah dramatizes therapy not as professional counseling but as resistance through intimacy, storytelling, and solidarity.

Satire, Trauma, and Paranoia in Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*

Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* has been widely studied as a political satire of General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship. Critics such as **Claire Chambers (2012)** and **Tabish Khair (2014)** praise Hanif's irreverent humor, while **Waseem Anwar (2015)** highlights its postmodern playfulness. The novel's absurdist tone has been read as a way of challenging authoritarianism, exposing state violence through laughter rather than lament.

What remains underdeveloped in scholarship, however, is how satire itself functions as a mode of representing trauma. Trauma theory suggests that when direct articulation is impossible, alternative narrative modes—silence, fragmentation, irony—emerge. Hanif’s absurdist narrative can be read as precisely such a strategy. Characters in the novel, particularly Ali Shigri, navigate paranoia, repression, and grief not through confessional therapy but through sardonic observation and narrative deflection. This aligns with LaCapra’s notion of “acting out” in repetitive, obsessive returns to traumatic memory, albeit masked under irony.

Few critics have explicitly connected Hanif’s satire to psychological criticism. By reading satire as both a shield and a symptom of trauma, this research positions Hanif’s novel within trauma studies, arguing that laughter becomes a substitute therapy—an unstable, fragile, yet politically powerful means of coping.

South Asian Scholarship on Trauma and Mental Health in Fiction

Beyond individual authors, South Asian literary studies have increasingly begun to engage with trauma, though not always in relation to therapy. Partition literature, for example, has been a central site for trauma analysis. Scholars such as **Urvashi Butalia (1998)** and **Gyanendra Pandey (2001)** examine silenced memories of Partition violence, while **Priya Kumar (2010)** highlights the impossibility of closure. These studies, however, largely focus on mid-twentieth century events and Hindi-Urdu literatures, leaving contemporary Anglophone Pakistani novels less examined.

Recent scholarship has expanded to include terrorism and post-9/11 trauma in South Asian fiction. **Amardeep Singh (2014)** and **Fawzia Afzal-Khan (2017)** discuss how Pakistani novels negotiate violence, but they rarely foreground therapy as a narrative concern. Mental health remains an emerging field in South Asian literary criticism, with scholars like **Shazia Rahman (2019)** calling for more attention to the psychological costs of patriarchy and authoritarianism.

This study responds directly to that call, filling the gap by explicitly interrogating how Pakistani fiction represents therapy, trauma, repression, and healing. Unlike Partition studies that emphasize collective memory or terrorism studies that emphasize violence, this project centers the subtler, ongoing wounds of repression and the contested discourse of therapy in contemporary Pakistan.

Establishing the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research draws primarily on **trauma theory** (Caruth, LaCapra) and **psychological criticism**, but it adapts these to the Pakistani context. Caruth's notion of trauma as a "wound that cries out" helps interpret silences in Khan's novel, while LaCapra's "working through" versus "acting out" informs readings of Shah's dystopian collectives and Hanif's satirical repetitions. At the same time, this research acknowledges critiques of trauma theory's Eurocentrism. As **Kaplan (2005)** and **Rothberg (2009)** argue, trauma must be understood in culturally situated terms.

Therefore, the framework here is hybrid: it employs trauma theory as a starting point but resists its universalizing tendencies, instead situating therapy and trauma within Pakistani cultural realities of stigma, silence, and resistance. Therapy in these novels may not resemble Western psychoanalysis but may appear in forms such as storytelling, satire, collective secrecy, or silence. By broadening the category of "therapy," this study makes space for culturally specific forms of psychological negotiation that Pakistani fiction narrates.

Research Gap Revisited

In surveying the critical landscape, three clear gaps emerge:

1. **Underrepresentation of Psychological Criticism in Pakistani Literary Studies:** While there is abundant scholarship on politics, religion, and gender in Pakistani fiction, trauma and therapy as psychological concerns remain marginal.
2. **Neglect of Narrative Form as Trauma Representation:** Existing studies on Khan, Shah, and Hanif often discuss content but not how fragmentation, dystopia, or satire embody trauma's resistance to representation.
3. **Limited Engagement with Therapy as a Cultural Concept:** Few critics ask whether therapy is normalized, resisted, or reimagined in Pakistani fiction.

This project directly addresses that question.

By filling these gaps, the study positions itself at the intersection of trauma theory, psychological criticism, and Pakistani Anglophone fiction, offering a nuanced understanding of how literature narrates trauma and negotiates healing in a stigmatized environment.

In short, the literature reviewed here demonstrates that while trauma studies have developed robust frameworks globally, their application to Pakistani Anglophone fiction remains partial. Scholarship on Khan, Shah, and Hanif emphasizes politics, gender, and satire but seldom foregrounds trauma as a psychological wound or therapy as a contested cultural practice. By engaging trauma theory critically and situating it within Pakistani contexts, this study will contribute an original perspective: that contemporary Pakistani novels both reflect and shape emerging discourses on mental health, revealing how therapy, trauma, repression, and healing are narratively constructed in a society where silence has long been the default.

Research Methodology

Nature of the Study

This research is fundamentally **qualitative and interpretive**, situated within the domain of literary and cultural criticism. Rather than employing quantitative surveys or clinical data, the study examines novels as cultural texts that narrate and reflect the evolving discourse of mental health in Pakistan. Since the primary concern is with **representations of therapy, trauma, repression, and healing** within Pakistani Anglophone fiction, the methodology relies on **textual analysis and comparative interpretation**.

The study treats fiction not merely as a mirror of sociopolitical realities but also as an active site where psychological wounds are narratively constructed and contested. Trauma theory asserts that trauma often resists direct representation, instead surfacing through silences, fragmented narratives, irony, or dystopian exaggeration. This research, therefore, attends to narrative form and language alongside thematic content, recognizing that how a novel tells a story is as significant as what it tells.

Selection of Texts

The three selected novels—*The Geometry of God* by Uzma Aslam Khan, *Before She Sleeps* by Bina Shah, and *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* by Mohammed Hanif—were chosen because they represent diverse narrative strategies for engaging with trauma in contemporary Pakistani fiction.

1. **Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God* (2008)** addresses suppressed trauma and silenced voices within a socio-religious and patriarchal framework.

Its fragmented narrative structure and emphasis on censorship dramatize the ways in which trauma circulates in everyday Pakistani life, particularly for women. The novel illustrates trauma as a wound that cannot be openly expressed, thereby raising questions about the absence or impossibility of therapy.

2. **Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps* (2018)** situates trauma in a dystopian future, where women's psyches are relentlessly policed by authoritarian structures. The text provides a speculative but culturally rooted lens for examining how repression creates psychological fatigue, paranoia, and resistance. By staging covert collectives as spaces of solidarity and healing, Shah's novel foregrounds alternative, non-clinical forms of therapy.
3. **Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* (2008)** explores trauma through satire, absurdity, and paranoia. Hanif's narrative strategy destabilizes the solemnity often associated with trauma, suggesting that laughter and irony themselves may act as fragile coping mechanisms. By transforming trauma into political satire, Hanif complicates the relationship between repression and therapeutic expression.

Together, these novels represent three distinct narrative registers—silence, dystopia, and satire—that reveal how Pakistani fiction negotiates trauma under conditions of stigma and repression. Their selection ensures both thematic breadth and methodological depth, offering multiple entry points into the cultural construction of therapy and trauma.

Analytical Approach

The study employs a **multi-layered analytical approach** that integrates close reading, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis:

1. **Close Reading:** Detailed textual analysis of selected passages will foreground how trauma is narrated through imagery, voice, silence, and structure. For instance, fragmented narration in Khan's novel, the claustrophobic metaphors in Shah's dystopia, and Hanif's satirical deflections will be analyzed as textual manifestations of trauma.
2. **Thematic Analysis:** Key themes—repression, paranoia, silence, collective resistance, satire—will be identified across the three novels. This allows for

comparative interpretation of how trauma and therapy are represented in different contexts, highlighting similarities and divergences in narrative strategies.

3. **Discourse Analysis:** The study also attends to the cultural discourse surrounding mental health in Pakistan. By situating the novels in a society where therapy is stigmatized, the analysis explores how fiction participates in, critiques, or resists dominant discourses about mental illness. For example, therapy may appear not as psychiatry but as storytelling, collective solidarity, or irony.
4. **Comparative Reading:** The three texts will be placed in dialogue with one another to show how different narrative modes represent the same central concern—trauma under repression. This comparative dimension strengthens the argument that Pakistani fiction is not monolithic but diverse in its approaches to mental health discourse.

Justification for Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical lens guiding this research is **trauma theory**, as articulated by Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, supplemented by **psychological criticism**.

- **Cathy Caruth's work** is central to understanding trauma as an unassimilated experience that returns belatedly in fragments. Her concept helps analyze why characters in *The Geometry of God* remain silent, why Shah's dystopian women express paranoia indirectly, and why Hanif resorts to irony rather than confession. Trauma's resistance to direct representation aligns closely with the narrative strategies these texts employ.
- **Dominick LaCapra's distinction** between "acting out" (repetitive return of trauma) and "working through" (critical, therapeutic processing) provides a framework for examining how characters negotiate repression. In Khan's novel, silence and repetition suggest "acting out." In Shah's dystopia, clandestine solidarity may signal attempts at "working through." In Hanif's satire, irony oscillates ambiguously between the two states.
- **Psychological criticism** further aids in analyzing characters' psyches, repression mechanisms, and the ambivalent presence of therapy. It allows for reading silence, satire, and collective resistance not merely as literary devices

but as psychological negotiations with trauma.

While trauma theory is central, the study remains alert to its **Eurocentric limitations**. As Kaplan and Rothberg caution, trauma cannot be universalized. Therapy in Pakistan is embedded in cultural stigma, religious interpretation, and patriarchal structures. Therefore, this research adapts trauma theory to local contexts, recognizing alternative forms of therapy—storytelling, satire, secrecy—as culturally specific modalities of healing or resistance.

This hybrid framework is justified for three reasons:

1. It bridges global trauma theory with Pakistani cultural realities, ensuring analytical rigor while avoiding universalist assumptions.
2. It foregrounds narrative form as central to trauma representation, aligning with Caruth's emphasis on the limits of language.
3. It situates Pakistani fiction within global trauma studies, highlighting both resonances and divergences.

Ethical and Interpretive Considerations

Although this research does not involve human subjects in the conventional sense, it engages with sensitive issues—trauma, repression, and mental health—that require careful interpretation. The study avoids pathologizing fictional characters or reading novels as direct case studies of Pakistani society. Instead, it treats them as **narrative experiments** that dramatize cultural anxieties and possibilities. This interpretive stance acknowledges literature's autonomy while also situating it within broader socio-cultural discourses.

Furthermore, the methodology resists imposing Western psychiatric frameworks as universal. Instead, it foregrounds the specificities of Pakistani contexts where therapy may be stigmatized, inaccessible, or reimaged through alternative practices. This culturally sensitive approach ensures that the analysis remains critical, nuanced, and responsible.

To sum up, the chosen methodology—qualitative, textual, comparative, and theory-driven—allows for a comprehensive exploration of how contemporary Pakistani fiction narrates trauma and therapy. By focusing on three novels that represent trauma through silence, dystopia, and satire, the study highlights the multiplicity of narrative strategies in negotiating repression. The integration of trauma

theory and psychological criticism provides a robust framework for analyzing these texts while remaining attentive to cultural particularities.

Ultimately, this methodology justifies the project's central aim: to examine how Pakistani Anglophone fiction participates in the global discourse of trauma while also challenging and reshaping it to reflect local realities of mental health, stigma, and healing.

Analysis and Discussion

This section applies the twin lenses of trauma theory (Cathy Caruth; Dominick LaCapra) and psychological criticism to the three selected novels—*The Geometry of God*, *Before She Sleeps*, and *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*—to examine how contemporary Pakistani fiction represents trauma, therapy, repression, and (possible) healing. The analysis proceeds in three close-read clusters (one per novel), followed by comparative synthesis and a discussion of what these readings contribute to scholarship on South Asian trauma narratives and mental-health discourse.

1. *The Geometry of GOD*: Silence as Symptom and Strategy

Uzma Aslam Khan's novel stages trauma largely through **absence**—silence, erased histories, and the slow attrition of intellectual and emotional life under sociopolitical pressure. Reading the novel with Caruth's idea that trauma returns belatedly and resists straightforward narration clarifies why the book's most charged moments are often framed by what is not said rather than by explicit confession. The text's formal features—ellipses, pauses in narrative voice, interrupted memories—can be read as formal embodiments of what has not been assimilated into language.

Psychologically, repression and dissociation are central: characters internalize prohibitions (religious, patriarchal, political) that make overt mourning or therapy dangerous. LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" is useful here. The novel shows repetitive patterns—silences that recur in different generations, recurring motifs of constrained speech, reiterated evasions of direct confrontation with violence—that resemble acting out: the trauma keeps returning not as meaningful reflection but as compulsive repetition. The novel rarely models institutional or clinical therapy; instead, it shows the absence of therapeutic infrastructure and social permission. Thus "therapy" appears less as a practical alternative than as a cultural lacuna—an affordance denied by stigma and danger.

Two interpretive consequences follow. First, silence is not simply aesthetic restraint; it functions as a political symptom. The novel suggests that when public institutions (courts, hospitals, media) are complicit or cowardly, private speech becomes risky; silence is therefore both self-protection and psychic injury. Second, the text complicates the assumption that narrative disclosure (testimony) is always curative. In contexts where disclosure can bring social ostracism or worse, “working through” via speech is not easily available; the book thus forces trauma theory to reckon with contexts where testimony is dangerous. Critically, this reading extends earlier scholarship (which emphasized religion/science and gender politics) by showing how narrative form embodies the costs of structural repression and by centering *the lack of therapy* as itself politically meaningful.

2. *Before She Sleeps*: Dystopia as Laboratory for Collective Therapy

Bina Shah’s dystopia translates social repression into psychic claustrophobia. Where Khan dramatizes silence as injury, Shah focuses on **surveillance, regulation of intimacy, and institutionalized control of desire**—conditions that produce chronic hypervigilance, anxiety, and a slow, pervasive weariness. Caruth’s account of trauma as belated return is visible here in the novel’s recurrent nights of fear and flashback-like memories that intrude into waking planning; dystopia makes psychological pressure legible by literalizing the stakes.

The most significant contribution of this novel to the question of therapy is its depiction of **collective, informal modes of care**—secret book circles, whispered confidences, small networks of mutual support. These are not clinical therapies but social forms that approximate therapeutic functions: witnessing, empathic listening, shared narrative reconstruction. From a LaCaprian perspective, such collectives can create conditions for “working through” precisely because they provide safe, sustained reflection and communal validation rather than mere symptomatic acting out.

However, the novel resists an uncomplicated celebration of these spaces. Shah interrogates their limits: secrecy imposes constraints; solidarities are fragile and vulnerable to infiltration; emotional labor is uneven and often borne by the same women who suffer the trauma. Psychologically, this raises the problem of **survivor burden**—those who try to hold the group’s psychic space are themselves wounded

and under-resourced. The novel thus stages a tension between the emancipatory potential of collective storytelling and the structural inadequacies (lack of public mental-health provision, legal supports) that make such improvisations necessary but insufficient.

This reading agrees with feminist critics who have underscored Shah's attention to gendered biopolitics, but it extends those interventions by demonstrating how dystopian aesthetics map onto affective economies: surveillance produces anxiety; surveillance's antidote in the novel is relational therapy rather than institutional psychiatry. In cultural terms, Shah's work therefore reframes therapy as a social practice—often practiced clandestinely—rather than as a clinic-bound technique, challenging Western assumptions that “therapy” equals the professionalized therapist-patient dyad.

3. *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*: Satire, Paranoia, and Humor as Defensive Narrative

Mohammed Hanif's novel is formally and tonally the most different of the three: its register is satirical, its pace episodic, and its affect often comic. Yet satire here performs crucial psychological work. When direct articulation of terror and repression is too risky or too painful, humor can function as a **defensive cognition**—a way to deflect unbearable affect, to minimize cognitive dissonance, and to manage collective anxiety. Trauma theory has long noted that indirect modes (silence, fragment, humor) are alternative forms of addressing the unspeakable; Hanif's satire can be read as a culturally intelligible equivalent of consolation.

LaCapra's “acting out”/“working through” distinction helps parse the comic mode's ambivalence. On one hand, the recurring jokes, absurd set pieces, and elaborate conspiratorial tangents can appear as acting out: repetitive, compulsive return to the formative event (state violence) not as critical processing but as a manic reiteration. On the other hand, satire may also constitute a form of working-through—by exposing intelligence, by socializing trauma through laughter, by creating communal recognition of the absurdity of repression. Humor socializes the unmentionable, converting isolated pain into shared ridicule of power.

Psychologically, satire in Hanif serves both as **catharsis** and as **safety valve**. It allows characters (and readers) to approach intolerable topics obliquely; the comic frame

mitigates risk, offering a cultural idiom for discussing cruelty without direct accusation. This is significant because it reveals how therapy in contexts of repression may not look like therapy: it can be social performance, parody, or lampooning as collective affect regulation.

Critically, this interpretation expands on prior readings that mainly emphasize Hanif's political critique. It argues that his comic aesthetics are not merely stylistic choices but psycho-political strategies that constitute an indigenous therapeutic practice—fragile, ambivalent, and necessarily contingent on social spaces where ridicule can circulate without immediate reprisal.

4. Cross-Textual Patterns: Therapy, Stigma, and the Politics of Representation

Comparatively, the three novels map a spectrum of narrative strategies for coping with trauma and for imagining therapy:

- **Khan:** silence, repression, fractured narration → trauma as injury that cannot safely be narrated; therapy is absent or impossible.
- **Shah:** clandestine collectives, relational witnessing → trauma managed through communal, improvisational therapies; therapy is reimagined as solidarity.
- **Hanif:** satire and parody → trauma displaced into humor; therapy appears as social catharsis rather than clinical intervention.

Several cross-cutting insights emerge.

(a) Therapy is culturally inflected. None of the studied novels centers formal psychiatric therapy as the primary site of healing. Instead, therapy appears in culturally adapted forms—silence as protective strategy, small-group witnessing, satire as social coping. This finding problematizes assumptions within trauma studies that foreground clinical therapy as the universal mode of recovery, pushing scholars to consider a broader typology of therapeutic practices.

(b) Stigma shapes narrative possibility. Across texts, stigma—religious, social, political—constrains the legitimacy of speech and thus the possibility of therapeutic confession. Where social punishment is probable, authors stage alternative narrative forms rather than straightforward testimony. Trauma theory's emphasis on the ethics of testimony must therefore be expanded to account for the costs of speech in authoritarian or honor-bound contexts.

(c) **Narrative form is therapeutic practice.** Form matters. Where authors use fragmentation, dystopian worldbuilding, or satire, those modes are not merely aesthetic but perform therapeutic labor: containing, displacing, or enabling the traumatic material. This supports a methodological stance that foregrounds formal analysis in trauma criticism.

5. Re-Evaluating Critical Positions and Scholarly Contribution

The readings presented here partly agree and partly diverge from existing criticism. Where critics have productively located these novels within postcolonial, feminist, or political frames, this study insists on the added value of psychological and trauma-theoretical attention. It contends that prior accounts sometimes underplay the affective topography—how repression is lived in bodies and circuits of intimacy—and thus miss how novels enact therapeutic imaginaries.

Specifically, this analysis:

- Extends readings of *The Geometry of God* by relocating silence from a purely ideological problem to a psychic condition with narrative consequences.
- Augments feminist/dystopian interpretations of *Before She Sleeps* by analyzing how collectives function as emergent therapeutic systems under patriarchy.
- Recasts *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* as not only political satire but as a text that enacts communal coping mechanisms for shared trauma.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the utility—and limits—of applying Caruth and LaCapra to South Asian contexts. Caruth's emphasis on belatedness and LaCapra's working-through/acting-out dichotomy remain powerful analytic tools, but they require cultural calibration to account for contexts where testimony can be dangerous and where institutional therapy is scarce or stigmatized. This research therefore contributes to a more pluralistic trauma theory—one attentive to culturally specific modalities of repair, secrecy, and resistance.

6. Implications: Literature, Mental Health, and Public Discourse

Finally, the analysis underscores an ethical and political implication: fiction in Pakistan serves a quasi-therapeutic public function. By making psychological suffering legible (even indirectly), these novels help normalize conversations about mental health—even if they stop short of endorsing clinical therapy. They create

narrative spaces where readers can recognize patterns of repression, empathize with sufferers, and imagine alternatives to isolation.

This has pedagogical and civic significance. In a context where stigma curtails help-seeking, literature's capacity to render internal worlds visible can be an important cultural intervention—one that complements clinical and policy efforts to make mental health care accessible and legitimate. For literary studies, it suggests a research agenda that links narrative analysis to public mental-health debates, showing how interpretive work can inform broader efforts to destigmatize therapy.

To conclude, applying trauma theory and psychological criticism to these three novels reveals a complex cultural ecology around therapy and trauma in Pakistani fiction. Silence, secret solidarity, and satire are not merely narrative effects; they are culturally intelligible strategies for modulating unbearable experience. The novels studied here broaden our understanding of how trauma can be narrated and negotiated outside the assumptions of Western psychiatric normativity. In doing so, they invite trauma studies to be more attentive to cultural variation and to the political stakes of speech, secrecy, and communal care.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how contemporary Pakistani fiction narrates therapy, trauma, repression, and healing, using Uzma Aslam Khan's *The Geometry of God*, Bina Shah's *Before She Sleeps*, and Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* as case studies. Anchored in psychological criticism and trauma theory (Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra), the research sought to answer whether these works normalize therapy, question it with suspicion, or reimagine it through alternative cultural frameworks.

The analysis demonstrates that therapy in these novels rarely appears in its formal, clinical sense; instead, it is refracted through silence, secrecy, satire, and collective resistance. In *The Geometry of God*, trauma is narrated through absences and silences that reflect both repression and protection. Here, therapy is imagined as impossible or unsafe, with silence itself functioning as both a wound and a shield. In *Before She Sleeps*, Shah envisions therapy in relational and collective terms—women's clandestine solidarities stand in for counseling or psychiatric care. These informal networks foreground listening, witnessing, and mutual support, highlighting

how community substitutes for institutional therapy in a society where formal avenues are inaccessible or stigmatized. Meanwhile, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* deploys satire and humor as coping mechanisms, suggesting that parody and communal laughter can operate as cultural equivalents of therapeutic practice, diffusing fear and enabling shared recognition of repression.

Taken together, the three novels complicate trauma theory's emphasis on testimony and clinical recovery. Caruth's model of trauma as a belated return and LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" illuminate the texts' strategies but also reveal the limits of Western frameworks when applied uncritically to South Asian contexts. Pakistani fiction demonstrates that testimony may not always be viable or safe, that therapy may take collective rather than individual form, and that humor or silence may be therapeutic strategies in themselves. By situating these novels within a psychological framework while attending to their cultural specificity, this study adds nuance to global trauma studies and expands the understanding of how literature can reflect and reshape mental-health discourse.

The research questions are therefore answered in layered ways: the novels do not straightforwardly normalize therapy, but neither do they reject it entirely. Instead, they reconfigure therapy into forms that are culturally and politically legible in Pakistan: silence as survival, solidarity as healing, satire as catharsis. The originality of this study lies in reframing Pakistani fiction as a site where therapy is imagined outside clinical settings, thereby challenging Western-centric assumptions in trauma criticism and highlighting literature's role in public mental-health discourse.

The implications of these findings are both literary and socio-political. For literary scholarship, they suggest that form—fragmentation, dystopian world-building, satire—should be read as more than aesthetic choice; these are therapeutic modes embedded in narrative practice. For cultural studies and mental-health advocacy, the novels reveal how fiction can model conversations around trauma in contexts where silence dominates public life. They point to literature as a subtle but vital tool in destigmatizing psychological suffering in Pakistan.

Future research could extend this inquiry in several directions. Comparative work might examine how South Asian fiction beyond Pakistan narrates trauma, especially in India, Bangladesh, or diaspora contexts. Further studies might also

investigate the role of genre—whether satire, dystopia, or historical realism—in shaping therapeutic possibilities within fiction. Another promising avenue would be interdisciplinary work linking literature with clinical psychology or medical humanities, exploring how fictional representations might inform culturally sensitive therapeutic practices.

In conclusion, contemporary Pakistani fiction offers not merely narratives of trauma but also imaginative repertoires of therapy—unconventional, culturally situated, and politically charged. These texts remind us that healing does not always occur in clinics or counseling rooms; sometimes it emerges in silences that protect, in solidarities that sustain, and in laughter that disarms power. By bringing such representations to light, this study affirms the centrality of fiction in shaping both academic understanding and public discourse on mental health in Pakistan.

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