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Research Article

Transforming Wounds into Words: Violence, Trauma, and Memory in Rana's *Seto Bagh* and Rushdie's *The Knife*

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Abstract

Literature offers a vital space to confront violence, preserve memory, and reimagine survival. Diamond Shumsher Rana's Seto Bagh (1973; The White Tiger, 1991) dramatizes the disintegration of the Rana regime, exposing political betrayal, systemic brutality, and the precariousness of dynastic authority. Salman Rushdie's The Knife (2024), composed after an assassination attempt, shifts the focus to an intimate register, meditating on bodily trauma, resilience, and the endurance of voice in the face of censorship and extremism. Though divergent in genre and context—historical fiction and memoir—both works trace the persistence of trauma and its return through memory and narration. Grounded in Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, this study examines how Rana and Rushdie differently translate violence into narrative: Seto Bagh memorializes collective suffering, framing political collapse as historical inevitability, while The Knife testifies to lived vulnerability, underscoring survival and artistic defiance. Reading these texts together reveals literature's dual role as archive and testimony—one that preserves communal histories of violence and bears witness to individual endurance. Ultimately, both works affirm that trauma, whether national or personal, demands articulation. In transforming wounds into words, they resist silencing forces and ensure that memory remains a living act of resistance.

Keywords: collective memory, survival, historical fiction, witnessing, resilience, censorship, dynastic collapse

Introduction

Violence does not simply end after it occurs; it remains alive in memory, in stories, and in the ways people understand themselves. As LaCapra observes, "trauma is a disruptive experience that cannot be entirely mastered and leaves its mark on memory, identity, and history" (41). Because of this persistence, literature becomes more than storytelling; it serves as a medium

for remembering and carrying history forward. Felman and Laub argue that literary testimony is “the literary or artistic means by which trauma is not only recorded but relived” (204). In the Nepali context, historical fiction performs a similar function by expressing collective emotions and recalling forgotten or silenced histories. Onta notes that “the narrative of Nepali history is inseparable from struggles over memory and forgetting” (213), exposing how the making of Nepali history is deeply embedded in the politics of power, identity, and silence.

This study examines Salman Rushdie’s *The Knife* and Diamond Shumsher Rana’s *Seto Bagh*. Both texts illustrate how violence and societal collapse are preserved within cultural memory. Rana’s *Seto Bagh* depicts the fall of the Rana dynasty, foregrounding betrayal, conspiracy, and political decay as forms of shared national trauma. Rushdie’s memoir, *The Knife*, recounts his 2022 stabbing attack and presents both its physical and emotional aftermath. Rushdie’s eye as bulged out of its socket and hanging down on his face like a large soft-boiled egg. Rushdie himself characterizes the attack as an extraordinary half-minute of intimacy between life and death. Additional striking details include an “arm lolling … like a large soft-boiled egg,” ventilator pipes compared to an “armadillo tail,” and hallucinations that reveal the raw intensity of trauma (Guardian). One reader reflects, “Dad, there are so many cases where somebody gets stabbed just once and dies … the fictional character … I now most strongly identify is Wolverine” (Guardian). These responses foreground both human vulnerability and the will to survive.

The theoretical framework of this study draws on Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory. Caruth asserts that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event … but rather in the way that its unassimilated nature returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). She further explains that “the traumatized carry an impossible history within them” (5) and that “the return of the traumatizing event … appears … like a waking memory … in the mode of a symptom or a dream” (159). These insights suggest that trauma does not remain a stable or linear memory but resurfaces in fragmented and haunting forms. Applying Caruth’s framework, this study demonstrates how *Seto Bagh* transforms national trauma into cultural memory, while *The Knife* converts personal suffering into testimonial narrative. Both texts illustrate that literature preserves and transmits memories of violence, ensuring that traumatic experiences are neither forgotten nor silenced.

Seto Bagh tells the story of a dynasty’s fall in a way that makes history feel painfully alive. The betrayals, power struggles, and acts of violence in the novel do not disappear with the end of a regime; instead, they linger in the nation’s memory, shaping how people remember their past and understand their present. Trauma here is not confined to individual suffering—it becomes something a society carries together, often silently, across generations. In contrast, Salman Rushdie’s *The Knife* brings readers face to face with trauma at its most personal and physical. His account of the attack and the strange, almost unreal sensations that followed captures how disorienting and overwhelming such moments can be, making clear that trauma is rarely easy to explain or fully grasp. What gives the memoir its power is Rushdie’s turn to art, imagination, and the uncanny as ways of living with pain rather than simply overcoming it. Read together, these works do more than describe violence; they bear witness to it and gently suggest how storytelling itself can help people remember, endure, and begin to heal.

Both texts underscore that violence leaves enduring marks on memory. It does not disappear with the act itself, nor can it be ignored. *Seto Bagh* reveals how political violence shapes national history, while *The Knife* presents the profound impact of personal trauma on an individual life. Together, these works highlight the ethical necessity of remembering violence in order to understand both collective and individual experience. Literature, in this sense, becomes a vital means of confronting, processing, and preserving traumatic memory.

Review of Literature

Personal trauma and cultural memory come together to shape how people and societies tell stories of violence. Rushdie's memoir shows the raw experience of a survivor: "nightmares and hallucinations crowd in" (*Guardian*). At first, he did not want to write: "that was the last thing I wanted to do" (NPR). But later, he saw writing as power: "the language was my knife" (NPR). Scholars of cultural memory explain that these stories matter not only to the person but to the larger group: "the solution ... is offered by cultural memory, a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience" (Assmann 126). Memory is also tied to history and place: "place and group have each received the imprint of the other" (Halbwachs 131). It suggests that memory is not an isolated mental act but is socially and spatially situated. It emphasizes that history is remembered through lived spaces and collective belonging, where place shapes group identity, and groups, in turn, inscribe meaning onto place. This reciprocal relationship destabilizes the idea of memory as merely individual and highlights its constructed, collective, and contested nature.

Trauma is difficult to describe clearly. Rushdie compares his injured eye to "a large, soft-boiled egg ... trying to pop out" (*Guardian*). Other parts of his story are strange and dreamlike, like when "the 'armadillo tail' of a ventilator pipe is pushed down a throat" (*People*). The book is also tied to real events, as it is "reflecting on the 2022 assassination attempt" (*Hindustan Times*). Some critics point out that unusual and artistic images may help in recovery: "art and the uncanny can influence trauma recovery" (Woolliscroft). Critically, it highlights how creative expression and unsettling familiarity open alternative ways to confront and reframe traumatic experience beyond clinical methods.

News and reviews have also recorded what happened. Reports note that "Rushdie lost sight in one eye and impaired use of one hand" (*BBC News*). Rushdie himself remembers the attack lasted only a short moment: "we had 27 seconds together. That's it" (NPR). Many articles mention his strange dreams and visions: "nightmares and hallucinations crowd in" (*Guardian*). On the other side, *Seto Bagh* has been studied as a historical novel full of betrayal and power struggles: "massacre, bloodshed and betrayal are commonplace" (Kumar). Scholars also describe it as "a projection of collusion, conspiracy, murder ... during the Rana Regime" (Upadhyay 44). Its very title suggests decline: "the title suggests the beginning of the fall and destruction of the Rana Regime" (Upadhyay 44). Personal stories give details that outsiders cannot see. Rushdie writes about his "bulging ... eye" (*Guardian*) and uses language as a way to survive: language is a way of breaking open the world. *Seto Bagh* shows how memory is shaped by politics, where "factionalism, jealousy, betrayals, violence, misogyny" dominate (Kumar).

There are challenges. Survivor stories can seem broken or unclear, and historical fiction can sometimes turn violence into art or leave out details (Upadhyay). But together, these two works show how personal trauma and cultural history connect. The fragments of Rushdie's story fit into the wider frame of collective memory, where "spatial images play so important a role in the collective memory" (Halbwachs 131). A new study can explore this more closely. *The Knife* shows personal trauma, and *Seto Bagh* shows national trauma. When read together, they reveal how violence is remembered both in the life of one person and in the history of a people. So far, no research has studied them side by side. Past studies looked at Rushdie's recovery and Rana politics separately, but not as part of the same system of memory.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and textual research design. The aim is to examine how violence, trauma, and memory are represented in *Seto Bagh* and *The Knife*. The design is qualitative because it looks at meaning, symbols, and narratives instead of numbers. It is textual because the main data are words and stories. Maurice Halbwachs and Cathy Caruth guide the theoretical

framework. Halbwachs helps to study how memory becomes collective, while Caruth helps to study how trauma shapes individual memory.

Halbwachs argues, “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs 38). This shows that memory is not just inside an individual mind but shaped by the group, by history, and by culture. *Seto Bagh* shows how the collapse of the Rana dynasty becomes a national memory, shaped by betrayal, violence, and loss. As Halbwachs also writes, “we appeal to witnesses, to the memory of others, and in this way recall what we ourselves would have forgotten” (Halbwachs 47). The novel dramatizes this process of remembering together, even when events are tragic.

Caruth provides a different but related perspective. She explains trauma as something that breaks the usual flow of memory. Caruth writes, “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). This means trauma cannot be easily remembered or told. It comes back in fragments, images, or strange dreams. *The Knife* shows this when Rushdie describes hallucinations, a bulging eye, or an armadillo tail. Caruth further explains, “the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is experienced too soon, too suddenly, to be fully known” (Caruth 4). Rushdie’s broken and surreal memories fit exactly into this view.

The texts are chosen because they connect both personal and collective dimensions of memory. *Seto Bagh* shows how national trauma becomes part of cultural history. *The Knife* shows how personal trauma shapes an individual’s survival and testimony. As Halbwachs reminds us, “even at the moment of reproducing the past, our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu” (Halbwachs 40). And Caruth adds, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 5). Together, these perspectives allow us to see how violence moves between the personal and the collective.

The method of collecting data is textual analysis. Primary data are the novels themselves. Secondary data are reviews, criticism, and historical records. The analysis looks for signs of memory and trauma in words, scenes, and narrative gaps. Caruth notes, “literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (Caruth 3). This helps to read broken stories, silences, and repetitions in the texts. Halbwachs also shows how memory is rebuilt by groups: “no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections” (Halbwachs 43). These frameworks guide the reading of *Seto Bagh*. In short, Halbwachs explains how memory becomes social and collective, while Caruth explains how trauma disrupts and reshapes personal memory. Both perspectives are needed because one text focuses on the collapse of a dynasty and collective memory, while the other focuses on an attack and individual trauma. Their theories show how memory is both shared and broken, collective and personal, cultural and intimate.

Textual Analysis

Violence as Collective Memory in *Seto Bagh*

Violence in *Seto Bagh* is not remembered as a single, isolated episode; rather, it emerges as a continuing presence embedded in Nepal’s collective historical consciousness. The novel recreates the Rana court as a space where intrigue, suspicion, and power struggles are routine, and where bloodshed and betrayal shape everyday political life. Violence here is atmospheric rather than episodic—it permeates relationships, governance, and social hierarchy. Such representation suggests that the trauma of the Rana period cannot be confined to individual victims or moments of crisis; it is instead absorbed into the shared memory of the nation. As Maurice Halbwachs argues, memory is

never formed in isolation, since “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories” (38). Read in this light, *Seto Bagh* presents the fall of the Rana regime not as a private tragedy of rulers but as a collective experience remembered and carried forward by society itself.

The novel further frames the dynastic collapse as a form of betrayal remembered on a social scale. The disintegration of the Rana order unfolds through jealousy, internal rivalries, and relentless struggles for dominance—forces that extend beyond individual ambitions and shape the broader historical imagination. Betrayal becomes a recurring pattern through which political change is understood and remembered. Halbwachs reminds us that “no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections” (43). In *Seto Bagh*, betrayal functions as precisely such a framework: it organizes how the past is recalled and interpreted. The novel itself acts as a witness, preserving these memories and making them accessible to later generations. As Halbwachs notes, “we appeal to witnesses, to the memory of others … to recall what we ourselves would have forgotten” (47). Through its narrative, *Seto Bagh* becomes a cultural witness, transforming dynastic violence into a lasting lesson embedded in Nepal’s collective memory.

This understanding is reinforced by other scholars who emphasize the novel’s complex position between history and imagination. Tara Prasad Adhikari views *Seto Bagh* as fundamentally historical in nature, suggesting that its primary function is to document the collective trauma of a specific political era rather than merely to entertain. Nabaraj Neupane likewise highlights how the novel blends historical fact with magical and supernatural elements, a strategy that reflects how traumatic memories are often refracted through myth, symbolism, and storytelling. Translation further complicates this process of remembering. Shrestha observes that *The Wake of the White Tiger* reshapes the source text through processes of adaptation and domestication, inevitably altering how cultural memory travels across languages. Similarly, Ramesh Prasad Adhikary argues that while translation seeks equivalence, it can never fully preserve the cultural and emotional weight embedded in Nepali historical terms. Finally, Sharma’s observation that *Seto Bagh* resists clear separation between history and fiction mirrors the unstable nature of memory itself—particularly memories shaped by violence. Together, these perspectives underline how *Seto Bagh* operates not just as a narrative of the past, but as a living archive of collective trauma, where history, memory, and imagination remain inseparably intertwined.

Violence and Trauma in *The Knife*

In *The Knife*, Rushdie recounts his stabbing in fragmented images that resist coherence. Caruth argues, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (5). After the attack, Rushdie describes being haunted by nightmares and hallucinations reported in press coverage. He portrays his wounded eye in grotesque metaphors, likening it to an object bulging unnaturally from his face. Hospital accounts further describe invasive procedures, including ventilator tubes and intensive care images, that became etched into his memory. As Caruth writes, “the wound of the mind … is experienced too soon, too suddenly, to be fully known, and therefore returns belatedly” (4). Reports also recount how Rushdie vividly remembered the attacker’s sudden emergence and the terrifying sprint toward him—details that illustrate trauma’s belated and haunting nature.

As Mathew stresses, *The Knife* “becomes an archive of violence and resilience” (323) where narration functions both as catharsis and testimony. Subedi and Saxena add that the memoir “offers insights into Rushdie’s thoughts and emotions … providing a glimpse into his experiences during that traumatic period” (3694). Varghese highlights Rushdie’s own slow-motion memory of the stabbing, noting how he recalled each blow in stark bodily detail (18760). This dramatization exemplifies how trauma embeds itself in memory as recurring images.

Writing as Survival

Even though trauma shatters memory, Rushdie turns writing into survival. Caruth explains, “the imperative to tell the story of the trauma … is a demand of survival” (5). While he initially admitted he did not want to write about the incident, he later reframed language as a weapon of resilience, describing it metaphorically as “his knife.” Mathew interprets this as “a literary act of resistance” where storytelling transforms pain into resilience (324). Subedi and Saxena confirm that *The Knife* “highlights healing and resilience, depicting his return to public life amidst worldwide support” (369).

Rushdie also insists that language opens the world anew. For Felman and Laub, testimony merges personal narrative with historical witnessing. *The Knife* enacts this dual role: Rushdie bears witness to his own stabbing while interrogating the cultural forces behind it. In Foucault’s terms, his body becomes marked by sovereign power; yet through writing, he “reclaims agency” (Mathew 324). Rushdie’s memoir also shows trauma as uncanny and surreal. He describes the attack in dreamlike terms, haunted by distortions of the body and mind. Caruth stresses that trauma “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event … but in the way its unassimilated nature returns to haunt” (4). Press coverage captured his disorientation, reporting his feelings of loneliness, of lying in blood among strangers, and of confronting the unreality of near-death. Woolliscroft emphasizes “how art and the uncanny can influence trauma recovery.” Subedi and Saxena similarly observe Rushdie’s recurring nightmares and dreamlike recollections, calling them “haunting returns of the event” (369). This suggests that while Woolliscroft foregrounds the therapeutic potential of art and the uncanny in facilitating trauma recovery, Subedi and Saxena extend this insight by demonstrating how Rushdie’s recurring nightmares and dreamlike memories function as belated, involuntary returns of traumatic experience that continue to shape post-traumatic consciousness.

Reading *The Knife* with *Seto Bagh* shows how violence is remembered on both personal and collective levels. Caruth reminds us that “the wound of trauma … demands a narrative that can be transmitted to others, but always imperfectly” (6). Rushdie’s private trauma surfaces in fragmented details, such as his vivid recollections of only a few seconds of the attack. Halbwachs, however, explains that “collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people” (48). This study also emphasizes that in *Seto Bagh*, “the narrative reconstructs dynastic betrayal as collective trauma, remembered by the nation” (Kumar). Neupane adds that the text “is an example of historical magical realism” (111), showing how societies process trauma through myth as well as memory. Adhikari stresses that the novel depicts “three decades of political history” (819), making dynastic fall part of the nation’s memoryscape. By placing these works side by side, we see how private trauma (Rushdie) and political betrayal (*Seto Bagh*) illuminate each other. Together, they show that violence does not end with the act itself; it continues to shape both individuals and communities through memory.

Findings

The analysis of Diamond Shumsher Rana’s *Seto Bagh* demonstrates that historical fiction can preserve collective trauma as cultural memory. The novel depicts the decline of the Rana dynasty through political betrayals, conspiracies, and systemic violence, showing how dynastic collapse becomes part of Nepal’s shared history. Halbwachs asserts that “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories” (38), and this is evident in how the novel situates individual experiences of betrayal within a larger societal framework. Kumar observes that “massacre, bloodshed and betrayal are commonplace” in the Rana court, emphasizing the ubiquity of political violence. Through these narratives, the text transforms individual acts of violence into a collective memory that the nation continues to recall. Upadhyay further notes that “the title suggests the beginning of the fall and destruction of the Rana Regime” (44), showing how even symbolic elements contribute to historical

remembrance. By dramatizing jealousy, factionalism, and power struggles, *Seto Bagh* memorializes the trauma of an entire political system, making history tangible and emotionally resonant for readers, while reinforcing the societal impact of violent political collapse.

In contrast, Salman Rushdie's *The Knife* presents trauma as a deeply personal and bodily experience, emphasizing survival, resilience, and the intimate consequences of violence. The memoir recounts the stabbing attack of 2022 with fragmented, surreal imagery—descriptions of a bulging eye ... like a large soft-boiled egg (*Guardian*) and a ventilator pipe resembling an “armadillo tail” (*People*)—illustrating Caruth's assertion that trauma “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event ... but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature ... returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Rushdie's hallucinations, nightmares, and distorted perceptions convey how trauma resists straightforward narration and how memory of violence appears in uncanny, unsettling forms. By transforming these experiences into testimony, he asserts agency over his survival, reframing writing as an act of reclamation: “the language was my knife” (NPR). Kakungulu Samuel observes that “art and the uncanny can influence trauma recovery,” highlighting the therapeutic and reflective potential of literary expression. Rushdie's narrative demonstrates that personal trauma, though isolated, intersects with broader cultural concerns, including the preservation of freedom, expression, and human dignity in the face of violence.

Comparatively, reading *Seto Bagh* alongside *The Knife* illustrates the multifaceted nature of trauma and memory, linking personal and collective experiences. Halbwachs emphasizes that “collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people” (48), while Caruth stresses that the traumatized carry “an impossible history within them” (5), showing that individual and societal recollections are mutually informative. In Rana's work, violence is remembered as a shared historical event that shapes national identity, whereas in Rushdie's memoir, it manifests as intimate, bodily, and psychological trauma. Together, the texts demonstrate that memory is a living process: it preserves, haunts, and instructs. Violence does not conclude with the act itself; it continues to influence individuals and communities through narrative and memory. By documenting both collective and personal traumas, the study shows that literature acts as both archive and testimony, ensuring that experiences of violence are neither forgotten nor silenced, but transformed into enduring stories of resilience, survival, and historical consciousness.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how violence, trauma, and memory are represented in Diamond Shumsher Rana's *Seto Bagh* and Salman Rushdie's *The Knife*, arguing that literature preserves both collective and personal experiences of trauma while shaping cultural and individual memory. The textual analysis demonstrated that in *Seto Bagh*, the fall of the Rana dynasty and the pervasive political betrayals become part of Nepal's collective memory, dramatizing how historical violence resonates across society (Halbwachs 38; Kumar 2022; Upadhyay 2018). In contrast, *The Knife* presents trauma as a deeply personal and bodily experience, where Rushdie's fractured, surreal recollections of the 2022 stabbing attack illustrate Caruth's theory of trauma as a belated, haunting experience that returns through memory and narrative (Caruth 4, 5). Together, these texts show that violence does not end with the immediate act but persists in memory, shaping both social consciousness and personal survival. The study underscores that literature functions as both archive and testimony: it preserves historical and personal experiences of trauma, allows readers to confront and process violence, and transforms wounds into words that resist silencing. Future research could explore other South Asian texts that address overlapping dimensions of personal and collective trauma, investigate comparative trauma narratives across different cultures, or analyze the role of gender, caste, and socio-political factors in shaping memory and literary testimony, thus extending understanding of how literature mediates between lived experience and historical consciousness.

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