Why I wrote Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones

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Why I wrote Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones

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Abstract

This essay is an excerpt from my book *Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones: Transforming, Not Transmitting, Trauma*, which offers fresh and exciting new directions of inquiry into the highly contentious issue of conflict resolution in South Asia. By shifting its gaze from a politics of division mired in ethno-nationalisms into a healing and restorative focus, the author moves the dialogue forward into the realm of community, healing, and shared governance. The book analyzes the major constitutional and political missteps that have led to the current situation of violence and distrust in countries such as India and Pakistan, keeping the focus on Jammu and Kashmir. This monograph will appeal to a wide range of audiences including academics, researchers, graduate students interested in South Asian politics, development, trauma studies, and peace and conflict studies.
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In a world that continues to be carved up into the false binary of West vs. East, there is an abundance of scholarly work on trauma, healing, and rebuilding solidarities in Europe and the United States, but a dearth of such scholarly work and literature about regions in South Asia, mainland Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa. As Rebecca Saunders, author of *Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy and Culture*, observes "While trauma theory has primarily been produced in Europe or the United States, trauma itself has, with equal if not greater regularity and urgency, been experienced elsewhere" (Saunders 15). Referencing American literary critic Shoshana Felman's chapter in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Stef Craps, Director of

Cultural Memory Studies Initiative at Ghent University, observes that Felman sporadically employs the expression "history as holocaust" (95; 105), but her work focuses "almost" entirely on the Holocaust, disregarding the disrepair and deterioration of other histories and societies that were/ are insidiously pervaded with trauma. He further observed that although the final chapter of *Testimony* has a part entitled "Heart of Darkness," which is the title of Joseph Conrad's anti-colonial and anti-imperial novel about the "Congo Free State," Felman employs that title to invoke Nazi barbarities while taking no account of the bestiality of colonial rule irrevocable suffering caused by it in non-Western countries (10).

In this book, my purpose is to call attention to non-Western societies, "beyond what might be considered the geographical bounds of a western paradigm," that are fractured and traumatized, and that will continue to sabotage themselves unless they actively engage in the process of healing (Edkins 9-10). It is also my purpose to employ the "strategy of comparison" between traumatic histories "in order to forge links" among those "histories" that would raise the "historical" consciousnesses of peoples "and promote their sense of civic responsibility" (Ball 15). The discourse of human rights, as I underline in my classes, does not have the universality that it should. As anthropologists Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman point out, "the social processes of the recognition of persons as traumatized effectively chooses its victims. Although those who promote the concept assert that it is universal, since it is a mark left by an event, study reveals tragic disparities in its use" (282). While several non-Western nations have been mangled and pummeled by discord, and some constituencies in the West have been "Otherized," they are not all "'regarded' as potentially grievable, and hence . . ., are made to bear . . . differential exposure to violence and death" (Butler 25). After quoting Judith Butler on the unethicality and "precarity" of the politicization of the discourse of human rights, Craps fittingly argues that "the sufferings of those belonging to non-Western or minority cultures must be given due recognition" (13).

While I admit that I have greatly benefitted from the exploration of issues of trauma in Holocaust literature and testimony, my purpose is not to give greater space or credence to "Euro-American events and experiences." On the contrary, my attempt is to highlight the heterogeneity of the identities and histories of children of the victims as well as survivors of the Holocaust. There is, nonetheless, much to learn from "qualitative" and "interpretive" studies of "survivors and their children, and the making of Holocaust consciousness" (186). Members of various victim groups can communicate with one another and learn about strategies of

healing psychological traumas in parts of the world that have been degraded by the instruments of militarization, increasing influence of the military in civilian affairs, normalization of sexual violence, insidiousness of institutional discrimination, hegemonic narratives of the state as well as insurgent movements, dehumanizing effect of incarceration and custodial torture, and those having difficulty reengaging with society. We learn to recognize cultural traumas, which occur:

> "when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leave indelible marks upon their group consciousness, not because it is in some way naturally ineffaceable but because it generates a structure of discourse that normalizes it in collective life over time" (1).

Cultures that internalize those negative historical events are motivated to "overcome the emotions and sentiments that accompany them," which include "the desire to repair a damaged reputation; the aspiration to recover respect in the eyes of the world; the wish to mourn losses and recover from censure; the longing to find meaning and dignity in the face of failure; the hope to shield family and relatives from recrimination; and the urge to minimize the event and pretend it never happened (Hashimoto 5).

To that end, the study of trauma stories of Holocaust survivors has enabled me to study the effects of intergenerational trauma in families of victims as well as perpetrators. It has also enabled me to examine the inculcation of those traumas into the collective consciousness of Jewish people, and revival of the agential capacities of a once oppressed people to engage with history from a perspective that empowers them. This inquiry has enriched my repertoire in educational strategies for empowerment in embattled zones. In my emphasis on employing such strategies for transforming, not transmitting, trauma in international conflict zones, I am not, by any means, glossing over the politically oppressive, socially disparaging, or economically disempowering conditions that cause traumas. Nor am I negating the enormous toll that systemic discrimination can take on the collective psyche of a people. I have remained firm in my belief that the restoration of human rights, revival of democratic voices, racial justice, and inclusion cannot be brought about without curative, not mere palliative, methods. Algerian psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, for instance, emphasized that the discrimination encountered by the black man in colonized nations was responsible for his alienation and debilitating neurosis:

> ". . . it is apparent to me that the effective disalienation of the black man entails an immediate recognition of social and economic realities. If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process:
>
> ---primarily economic;
> ---subsequently, the internalization---or, better, the epidermalization---of the inferiority." (10-11)

Illuminating the connection between "individual alienation" and "political alienation," Fanon offers the caveat that a "soul" cannot be salvaged without actively working to transform the social, political, and economic conditions that are responsible for its neurosis (ibid.). The persecution that oppressed races have been subjected to has spread its tentacles into political, sociocultural, and economic institutions, causing a cognitive dissonance.

But, I would argue, that while waiting for those conditions to change, peoples of nations that are governed by despot or draconian laws cannot refuse to hold themselves accountable. While "problems that are essentially political, social, or economic" cannot be "medicalized," nor can the "people affected by them" be "pathologized as victims without agency, sufferers that can be cured through psychological counseling" (Craps 28), it is empowering for people in conflict zones to create racial healing within themselves and their communities. It is just as validating to create spaces where they can heal and perceive themselves as agents of change, and recognize their duty, as Fanon reminded us, of "not renouncing" our "freedom" through our "choice" (229). By advocating for the alleviation of psychological illnesses, I am not nullifying the need for the revival of indigenous institutions and political redress. Nor is the purpose of my emphasis on practical empowerment training, healing of memories, and logotherapy to characterize the genuine grievances of besieged peoples as psychological imbalances. But I have serious qualms about the regressive preoccupation with the propagation of sentimental political discourse that iconizes victims of trauma. Such discourse commodifies, but does not change, the misery of a father who feels emasculated because he cannot fend for his family. It does not alleviate the anxiety of parents who are painfully aware that the productive years of their child are going by the wayside while the rest of the world is making strides. It does not enable political change that would compensate for the wailing of a tender-hearted mother whose son was waiting to plunge into life but has now been silenced by militarization. It does not enable emancipation that would give hope to the apathetic young educated person who thought the world was his/ her oyster but now has nothing to

look forward to. It does not provide a progressive political vision to people whose opinions are made short shrift of by the powers that be. It does not revive cultural and educational institutions that have been languishing in isolation. It does not enable the political assertion of people, who are wooed during election season, but whose opinions and rights are otherwise overlooked. On the contrary, such discourse, I would argue, turns peaceful protests and unarmed protestors who are fired at into mere objects of lamentation, and portrays the act of lamenting as "social deathmaking" (Berlant 307). In seeking to highlight an emancipatory pedagogical methodology that enables the articulation of ethical and political change, I consider the transnational application of therapies that are, conventionally, considered Eurocentric. For instance, logotherapist Alphonse Kanda's work in South Africa validates the applicability of logotherapy in a disrupted and battle-scarred part of the world. He writes, "In my experience in a psychiatric clinic of a government district hospital in rural South Africa, clients can actively engage in the healing process within their objective reality where meaning as a calling is located" ("Argument for Logotherapy in Rural African Setting" 22). I posit that the methodologies and therapies I have engaged with in this book facilitate "acknowledging and working through historical losses" (LaCapra, *Writing History* 44).

The "freedom" that several debased and dehumanized communities yearn for will remain a distant dream until we begin to think constructively about change within organizations and institutions. The project a repairing a damaged and "broken society" is work in progress. In this rehabilitative and "recovery project, memories are realigned and reproduced---to heal, bring justice, and regain moral status in the world---with varying degrees of success" (Hashimoto 5). A collective identity cannot be forged nor can a future be envisioned without engaging with our historical past. Historical truths are not immutable nor are they "uniform." How can fissures created by "historical representations" that have become "subjective, political projects" in several parts of the world, including Jammu and Kashmir, be healed? Can the purported permanent damage to "people's lives and bodies" in conflict zones be ameliorated? In reconstructing a society and rebuilding a nation, I consider it important to "take account of the sentiments, values, and motivations of ordinary people, not only decision-makers and intellectual elites (ibid., 18-19). To that end, I examine the healing of "national" and regional "memories of difficult pasts in various parts of the world "internalized by those who long to repair and recover from that legacy" (ibid., 19).

Young people, as I've reiterated several times, need to be reminded that despite the several letdowns, the process of democratization is an evolutionary one and does not provide instant solutions. In our zeal to be flag bearers of revolutionary movements, I would argue, we forget the importance of facilitating the healing of trauma survivors, helping them "anchor and stabilize individual and collective identity while repairing biographical wounds, and avoid threatening political entanglement with the outside world" (Hashimoto 47). Communities cannot be revived and nations cannot be rebuilt unless we actively work to rehabilitate those who have witnessed or encountered acts of barbarity or savagery; rebuild trust within and between communities; encourage young adults to acknowledge and celebrate heterogeneity; enrich learning environments where young people embrace authenticity and forge social cohesion; laud them for building up leadership abilities, and train them to participate in decision-making processes. It also becomes necessary to encourage discussion on the role of individual responsibility; increase awareness that the enjoyment of rights works in tandem with the shouldering of responsibilities; and enhance the emotional ability of young people to contribute to the repair of their communities, nations, and themselves. While not allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by the overload of information that threatens to engulf lives, we would do well to remind ourselves that local communities exercise prodigious influence in the restoration of humanity.

To that end, this book, in taking multidisciplinary approaches to major human rights issues, is a dynamic interplay between activists, academics, and clinicians. I have chosen to stay true to their ideas and words by reproducing them verbatim. I recognize the imperative of engaging with people in local communities, building on the resilience displayed by those communities in the wake of humanitarian disasters, and incorporating communitarian coping strategies into educational methodologies that seek to empower such communities. I have had the privilege of connecting and engaging with social justice activists, academics, and clinicians in the United States, South Africa, Canada, the Balkans, and Jammu and Kashmir who in their work with diverse communities have interrogated "hegemonic definitions of trauma" and healing, and have developed nuanced concepts of "local coping strategies" to effectively heal trauma (Craps 21, 23). They efficaciously train citizens to seek creation of non-militarized, non-militant and humane environments to ensure the rights of citizens to peacefully protest and to be heard by their political representatives.

An environment that ensures all citizens that they have a voice and that their voices will not go unheard must be created. In any society, when people are in

survival mode and trying to avoid being criminalized, to the extent that they are unable to participate in their governments, forces of power, greed and special interests take over. Bigotry and hate are at the root of this violence (Khan, "Realpolitik Relegates Human Rights to the Background"). I would argue that it in such situations it becomes necessary to:

> "think about . . . the legitimate means of resistance to a military machine at war, such as conscientious objection to serve the military, disobeying illegal orders of superiors, questioning the use of excessive military force, and protecting the rights of civilians and soldiers guaranteed by international conventions in times of war" (Hashimoto 48).

The current state of affairs in several parts of the world, including Jammu and Kashmir, is challenging, so it is crucial to have spaces of inclusion and pluralism within which citizens of all ages, but especially young people, can productively contribute to the re-building of their society through dialogue (Khan, "Realpolitik Relegates Humans Rights to the Background").

How damaging is mental and emotional trauma, particularly when it is intergenerational? Can a family/ community that is riven apart by grief and outrage and grief provide a sounding board? Can education be deployed as an effective tool in intergenerational family communication regarding sociocultural trauma? After having written extensively on the political, historical, and sociocultural issues of Jammu and Kashmir, I realized that while it was all very well to delve into these matters of import, how I, as an educator, could encourage students to engage with writings on traumas that young people experience in the volatile and highly charged atmosphere of various conflict zones. Every time I broach the topic of trauma in the classes I teach at institutions of higher education in the United States, I discern how well some students connect with the discussions because of their own agonizing encounters with human-created or natural disasters. My attempt is not to obscure the line between trauma in a non-militarized environment and mourning in a beleaguered and highly militarized one.

In 2015, Médecins Sans Frontières or Doctors Without Borders conducted a survey in Kashmir the results of which were as follows: out of, "5600 households selected from more than 400 villages in 10 districts 1.8 million adults (45% of the adult population) are experiencing symptoms of mental distress with 41% exhibiting symptoms of probable depression 26% probable anxiety and 19% probable PTSD" (qtd. in Aqeel, Sayed et al.).

The results clearly "indicated" that "on average an adult in the Kashmir valley" had either "witnessed or experienced 7.7" devastating "events during his/her lifetime." Having suffered so many distressing experiences, people were prone to "depression, anxiety, and PTSD" (ibid.). Based on these data, an educator, psychologist, or workshop facilitator working in a conflict riven region like Jammu and Kashmir can make the safe assumption that a large number of students/ young adults would be trauma survivors. It is in such precarious situations that the discretion of the educator comes into play. Would it be wise to encourage students to reveal experiential evidence of traumas that they may have encountered and suffered to their peers or not?

Psychologist Susan L. McCammon delved into the benefits of students revealing their traumatic experiences of their own volition. Borrowing from Inger Agger and S. B. Jensen, she highlights the "therapeutic value" to "trauma survivors" of providing testimonial evidence. Young people can be encouraged to reframe their traumas in order to place them within a "political and social context" (110) Their traumatic experiences then become stories of strength through enabling them to change their languages, understanding their geographical and spatial spaces, and committing themselves to building a new society based on transformative justice. Subsequently, a trauma survivor transitions from being the wounded and mutilated person to the impactful and constructive raconteur. In verbalizing the hitherto ineluctable brunt that the survivor has borne, she/ he breaks through the walls of self-imposed isolation. "Shame and guilt," as Cammon observes, "can be expressed and reframed" (ibid.).

In all my years of teaching in the North American academy, I have realized that students relate best to the materials they study if these materials are corroborated with testimonial evidence and discussed as stories of human interest. Stories about the tumult of war; devastation caused by fanatical hordes of people who lack an ideological foundation; distress that soldiers who are deployed in hostile territories encounter; the strain of readjusting to family and a regular job that returning soldiers, who have witnessed the unspeakable horrors of war, face, became relatable when they are told by those students of mine who are war veterans. Stories about the objectification of women in the domestic and public realms; infantilization of women in churches that do not consider them fit for leadership roles; criminalization of female sexuality and justification of misogynistic control; the raw wounds of women who have been physically and emotionally abused by their intimate partners; the impairment of women who have been treated as mere chattel; the dreadfulness and mutilating effects of child sexual

abuse are best understood when related by those students of mine who have either witnessed or borne such traumas. Stories about the harassment and discrimination encountered by the LGBTQ community; denial of the right to a dignified existence faced by members of that community; the damage caused to a person's sense of self-worth by the denigration of her/ his race or ethnicity; the damage caused by the internalization of stories that "otherize" minorities; the paranoia of Muslim women who fear that their traditional garb will cause them to be marginalized become more palpable when told by those of my students who have been impacted by these realities.

However, not every difficult disclosure receives the validation it deserves (Janoff-Bulman). Someone's story of trauma and victimization might push the listeners' buttons and trigger discomfiture and anxiety. Listeners might feel personally assaulted by stories that threaten their worldviews or beliefs that they have nurtured their entire lives. They might also feel vulnerable by narratives that challenge them to reflect on their allegiances and loyalties to nation, tribe, race, or ethic group. While survivors of trauma transform their vulnerabilities into strength, and make a giant leap toward healing when they disclose secrets that have been gnawing at them, not everyone, as I observed, responds with an open-mind to such revelations.

The purpose of encouraging honest and uninhibited discussions in the classroom is to work through experiences that have prevented students from reaching their full potential. I have come across young people in the United States and South Asia who have had to deal with more than their fair share of loss, bereavement, and trauma. Spaces in which they could express themselves without fear of reprisal have shrunk. They are distraught and have a diminished sense of self that undermines their pride. They mourn the loss of values that they had thought would buoy them up for eternity. They are disheartened by the looming sense that every political decision about their future will be presented to them as a fait accompli. The impairment and deterioration caused by political, economic, and social crises is greater than we might want to admit. Unless deliberate and well thought-out attempts are made to rectify this damage by enabling the healing of trauma survivors in tandem with the struggle for political rights, the buzzwords of "freedom," "self-determination," and "revolution," will not restore the well-being of a society. I would recommend "a trauma-informed approach to justice," in order to revive restorative justice, which would "build in supports and seek to repair the harm rather than just punish the wrongdoer" (Bargen).

In this era of abstract political and moral discourse, people often turn a blind eye to the importance of community and institution building, particularly in regions upon which havoc has been wreaked by violent conflict. Michael Lapsley of the Institute for Healing of Memories in post-apartheid South Africa reminded me that conflict is not unique to Jammu and Kashmir, which is why it is important to find the particularities and commonalities with other conflicts and survivors of traumas caused by those discordant situations (E-mail to author, 17 August 2020).

Those who have been in the political arena for a long time must recognize that there is no politics without negotiation. And the ultimate negotiating authority is always the citizens. Real democracies thrive on differences of opinions, not on gagging those who might not be on the same page. As I've said previously, the relationship of the only (up until now) Muslim Majority state within India was contingent on the depth of Indian democracy. We, the people of Jammu and Kashmir, will not falter from our ideal even if we are left alone in this great battle for democracy and humanity ("Revival of Democratic and Civil Society Institutions in Jammu and Kashmir").

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Author of several published articles, book reviews and editorials, Dr. Nyla Ali Khan has edited Parchment of Kashmir, a collection of essays on Jammu and Kashmir, written five books, including Educational Strategies for Youth Empowerment in Conflict Zones: Transforming, Not Transmitting, Trauma, The Fiction of Nationality in an Era of Transnationalism, and Islam, Women, and Violence in Kashmir: Between Indian and Pakistan. Several of her articles have appeared in academic journals, newspapers and magazines in the United States and South Asia. They focus heavily on the political issues and strife of her homeland, Jammu and Kashmir, India, where she visits frequently. Her unflinching commitment to pedagogy, scholarship, and her unrelenting faith in the critical focus that education can provide, motivate her to build bridges across racial, political, and ideological divides.