

## A Study of Gendered Trauma and Narrative Resistance in Danesh Rana's *Red Maize*

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### *Abstract*

*This study explores how ordinary individuals—particularly women—are victimised by state and insurgent violence in conflict-ridden regions, with a focus on Danesh Rana's novel Red Maize (2015). Drawing on Rana's lived experience as a police officer in the violence-torn Doda district during the late 1990s, the novel offers an intimate portrayal of trauma and survival amid geopolitical turmoil. The paper analyses the novel's depiction of gendered trauma, alternating narrative voices, symbolic representations such as the maize crop, and the roles of female agency and resilience in a militarised zone. Through a trauma-theoretical lens, this paper examines how Red Maize functions as a site of resistance literature that illuminates both individual suffering and collective resilience.*

**Keywords:** Kashmir conflict, gendered trauma, resistance, violence.

### **Introduction**

The Kashmir conflict, spanning over seven decades, is one of the most enduring and complex geopolitical crises in South Asia. While much scholarly and media attention has focused on the Kashmir Valley, the spillover of militancy and militarisation into the lesser-known Jammu regions, such as the Chenab Valley and Doda district, remains critically underexamined. Danesh Rana's novel *Red Maize* (2015) provides a rare literary engagement with this overlooked terrain, offering an unflinching portrayal of how socio-political upheaval devastates marginalised communities, particularly women.

Rana's professional background as an Indian Police Service officer stationed in Doda during the late 1990s lends the novel an immersive realism. The narrative unfolds in the fictional hamlet of Morha Madana, located on the banks of the Chenab River, which becomes a microcosm of the communal, psychological, and ecological destruction wrought by conflict. As Rana writes, "The call for azadi resonating in Kashmir crossed over to the mountains of Doda, to sweep village after

village, with a bloody price tag attached to it” (*Red Maize* 9). This line captures the ideological expansion of the separatist movement beyond the Kashmir Valley into adjacent Muslim-majority districts, where the landscape and demography became fertile ground for insurgency.

Though culturally distinct from the Valley, regions like Doda witnessed both voluntary and coerced participation in the insurgency, blurring the lines between ideological alignment and survival strategy. The novel’s setting—a village largely inhabited by Muslims after the exodus of Hindu families—further illustrates how demographic homogeneity can exacerbate vulnerability to militant control. The strategic topography of mountain chains and dense maize fields serves both as a sanctuary for insurgents and as a metaphor for entrapment and surveillance.

Through the lens of trauma theory, *Red Maize* foregrounds the enduring psychological wounds inflicted by both militant and military forces. The narrative focuses on characters like Kausar Jan, who loses all three sons to the conflict, and young women like Hasina and Fauzia, who are subjected to sexual violence and abandonment. Their stories reflect not only individual suffering but also the broader collapse of social cohesion and moral order.

This paper situates *Red Maize* within the framework of trauma studies, postcolonial feminist theory, and resistance literature. It argues that the novel disrupts conventional representations of the Kashmir conflict by highlighting the gendered dimensions of trauma and the latent forms of agency that persist even in oppressive circumstances. In doing so, it affirms the need to diversify and deepen our literary and critical engagements with the multifaceted realities of the Kashmir conflict.

### Theoretical Framework

Trauma theory as a critical framework provides a vital lens for understanding the psychological, emotional, and cultural consequences of violence and conflict. In literary studies, trauma theory has evolved to investigate the narrative ruptures and affective resonances left behind by personal and collective suffering. The concept of trauma originates from the Greek word for ‘wound,’ initially denoting physical injury. In the late nineteenth century, its semantic shift toward psychological damage marked a turning point in psychoanalytic and literary discourses.

Cathy Caruth, a foundational figure in trauma studies, argues that trauma is not merely an event but the belated experience of that event—a disruption of time and consciousness. In her influential book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). This definition underlines how trauma resists direct representation, instead returning involuntarily through symptoms, silences, and narrative gaps. Caruth’s framework draws heavily from Freud’s ideas on repression, belatedness (*Nachträglichkeit*), and the return of the repressed.

Kali Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, elaborates on how trauma literature functions as both testimony and resistance. She writes, “Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it real both to the victim and to the community” (137). Such writing validates the pain of the survivor while resisting the cultural erasure of that pain. Tal’s emphasis on the iterative and testimonial function of trauma narratives is particularly relevant in contexts like Kashmir and other conflict-prone areas, where silencing and denial often accompany political violence.

Kai Erikson's notion of collective trauma adds another dimension. He describes it as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together" ("Notes on Trauma and Community" 187). Unlike individual trauma, collective trauma destabilises communities, ruptures intersubjective bonds, and reshapes cultural memory. *Red Maize*, as a novel, reflects this layered form of trauma: the disintegration of familial and communal ties amidst sustained violence.

Further, Larry Ray in *Violence and Society* contextualises violence as an omnipresent, often socially sanctioned force. He writes, "violence is a universal human and interpersonal aggression" (3). Trauma theory, therefore, becomes a response to this universal presence of violence, particularly its psychological aftermath. It interprets violence not merely as an event but as a continuing condition—psychic, emotional, and often intergenerational.

Michel Foucault's assertion that "where there is power, there is resistance" (*The History of Sexuality* 95) is central to trauma narratives as acts of defiance. Narratives of trauma—especially those by or about marginalised subjects—reclaim agency by documenting experiences often omitted from official histories. In *Red Maize*, the fragmented, multi-perspective narration and the centrality of women's suffering and endurance offer precisely such a counter-narrative.

Finally, trauma theory intersects with postcolonial feminism in recognising how gender, power, and violence intersect in zones of conflict. Seema Kazi, in her essay on women and resistance in Kashmir, argues that militarisation transforms women into "protesters, prisoners, widows, survivors of rape, activists, informers, sex workers" (102). Trauma theory enables an understanding of how these roles are forced upon women, and how their stories—often silenced—serve as sites of memory, resistance, and subjectivity.

### **Contextualising Danesh Rana and Kashmiri Narratives**

Danesh Rana's novel *Red Maize* (2015) is deeply informed by his professional background as an Indian Police Service officer. Having served as Superintendent of Police in Doda—a district in the Jammu region of Jammu and Kashmir—during the peak of insurgency in the late 1990s, Rana offers an insider's perspective on the socio-political and psychological fallout of conflict. His intimate knowledge of the terrain, the people, and the subtle shifts in power relations lends the novel an authentic texture. What distinguishes *Red Maize* from many fictional accounts of the Kashmir conflict is this embedded realism, drawn from lived encounters with the region's complexities.

The setting of *Red Maize*—a fictional village called Morha Madana—mirrors real villages in Doda district that were caught in the crossfire between militant forces and state agencies. The Chenab Valley region, though historically underrepresented in mainstream Kashmir narratives, was significantly impacted by the spillover of violence from the Kashmir Valley. The novel illustrates how insurgent ideologies, initially concentrated in the Valley, gradually seeped into peripheral Muslim-majority regions such as Doda, Kishtwar, and Rajouri. Though culturally and linguistically distinct from the Kashmir Valley, areas like Doda exhibited ideological affinity with the separatist cause. This suggests a pan-Muslim solidarity rooted in historical grievances, marginalisation, and political disenchantment. The novel subtly captures this dynamic while resisting simplistic binaries. Rana does not romanticise insurgents nor glorify state actors; rather, he exposes how both instrumentalise civilians for strategic gain. This nuanced portrayal aligns *Red Maize* with other contemporary narratives that explore the human costs of conflict. Basharat Peer's *Curfewed*

*Night*, Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother*, Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*, and Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude* are some notable works that blend memoir, reportage, and fiction to interrogate the cycles of trauma, exile, and loss. What sets Rana's novel apart is its focus on the lesser-documented Jammu region and its female characters who embody both vulnerability and strength.

The geography of Morha Madana is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the unfolding narrative. The topography of mountains, rivers, and maize fields shapes the contours of fear, survival, and entrapment. As Rana notes, "The mountain chains overlooking the village of Morha Madana proved to be an ideal spot for the mujahids to take refuge" (*Red Maize* 9). The village's isolation renders it a strategic outpost for militants and a helpless theatre for militarisation. The departure of Hindu families further creates a homogenised, vulnerable space ripe for ideological manipulation.

In many ways, *Red Maize* acts as a counter-narrative to dominant political discourses that often efface the lived realities of borderland communities. By bringing attention to Doda's complex socio-religious landscape, Rana challenges the Valley-centric view of the conflict and highlights the broader geopolitical imbrications that shape resistance and repression.

### **Reading *Red Maize*: Trauma, Gendered Violence, and Resistance**

Danesh Rana's *Red Maize* is a poignant exploration of how violence pervades the lives of individuals and communities in conflict zones, with particular emphasis on the experiences of women. The novel's multi-perspective narrative weaves together personal loss, communal trauma, and systemic violence, foregrounding the resilience that emerges amid oppression.

### **Symbolism of Maize: Nourishment and Violation**

A recurring symbol in the novel is maize, which transcends its role as a staple crop to become a metaphor for survival, community, and violence. The title itself, *Red Maize*, encapsulates this duality—where maize signifies both life-giving sustenance and the bloodshed that stains the land. Kausar Jan, one of the central characters, tends her maize fields with devotion, equating them to her children: "Years after year, she would tend to the maize crop as if she were raising another child" (*Red Maize* 7). The metaphor deepens as her sons fall victim to conflict, paralleling how her maize fields are ravaged by violence. On one hand, maize represents the resilience of the villagers who persevere despite the chaos around them, on the other, the transformation of yellow kernels into "red kernels of maize" (*Red Maize* 103) highlights the corruption of innocence and the pervasive impact of violence. This interplay between hope and desecration underscores the precariousness of life in conflict zones.

### **Gendered Trauma and Female Agency**

The narrative pivots around Kausar Jan, whose experiences embody the layered suffering of women in conflict. As a mother who loses all three sons to militant and state violence, her grief is not only personal but emblematic of the collective trauma endured by conflict-ridden women. Rana writes, "She had become a metaphor of Kashmir—the coveted valley of conflict, the vast meadows of a million blooming flowers and ... the land strewn with deadly thorns" (*Red Maize* 243). This poetic description reinforces her identity as a microcosm of the region itself, cherished yet ravaged. Kausar Jan's journey from a hopeful parent to a grieving mourner is marked by phys-

ical and spiritual desolation. Rana observes, “There are no tears left in her eyes. Women embrace her and cry into her shoulder, but she remains indifferent” (*Red Maize* 212). Her transformation illustrates how trauma erodes the self, replacing faith and purpose with numbness.

The novel also explores how women, despite their victimisation, assert agency. Hasina’s decision to betray the area commander, Shakeel, after the militants kill her family exemplifies acts of resistance born of trauma. Her action disrupts simplistic victim-perpetrator binaries, revealing how survivors navigate power within constrained circumstances.

### **Exploitation of Civilians: A Dual Tyranny**

*Red Maize* exposes the duplicity of both militants and state actors, who exploit civilians for political and strategic gain. Gul Mohammad, the opportunistic village headman, epitomises this dynamic. His clandestine alliances with both militants and the army reveal the moral decay that conflict fosters. Yet, even he cannot shield his daughters from violence. Hasina and Fauzia, his daughters, fall victim to abduction and assault, demonstrating how women’s bodies are weaponised in conflict. Fauzia’s tragic death during a militant encounter underscores the cyclical nature of violence and the complicity that perpetuates it. Through these narratives, Rana critiques the structural violence that turns ordinary village folks pawns on a ruthless geopolitical chessboard. Kausar Jan’s family and Gul Mohammad’s moral compromises symbolise the broader rupture of community bonds and cultural cohesion, thus leaving individuals isolated and disempowered.

### **Conclusion**

Danesh Rana’s *Red Maize* emerges as a powerful literary intervention in the discourse surrounding the Kashmir conflict. By centring the narratives of ordinary individuals—particularly women—it challenges the erasure of their experiences from dominant historical accounts. The novel intricately portrays how violence infiltrates the personal and collective realms, leaving profound psychological and cultural scars. Kausar Jan’s story encapsulates the paradox of survival amid devastation. Her transformation from a hopeful mother to a grief-stricken mourner reflects the profound and irreversible impact of conflict on women’s lives, encapsulating the emotional and psychological toll of conflict on women. Yet, the novel does not confine them to passive victimhood. Instead, characters like Hasina illustrate how acts of resistance, however small, challenge structures of oppression and reclaim agency.

The symbolism of maize, as both sustenance and violation, captures the duality of life in a militarised zone—where hope persists but is constantly threatened. Rana’s use of this metaphor reinforces the intimate connection between the land and its people, underscoring how trauma extends beyond human bodies to encompass the environment and cultural identity.

*Red Maize* is also a critique of the dual tyranny inflicted by militants and state forces, exposing their complicity in exploiting and brutalising civilians. Through multi-perspective narratives, the novel highlights the collapse of communal bonds and the moral decay that conflict fosters, while simultaneously celebrating the resilience and resistance that emerge in such adversity. Ultimately, *Red Maize* demands a reimagining of how the Kashmir conflict is remembered and represented. By giving voice to silenced and marginalised experiences, Rana’s novel enriches our understanding of the intricate interplay between trauma, gender, and power. It calls for an empathetic engagement with the human cost of political violence, ensuring that the stories of the silenced are neither forgotten nor ignored.

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