Impact Factor: 5.421 (SJIF) SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies(IJOES)
ISSN:2581-8333; Vol-3, Issue-10,2021
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal

Memory, Identity, and Exile in Nadia Hashimi's Sparks Like Stars: A Critical Study

Prof. (Dr.) Arpana
GNDU College, Narot Jaimal Singh

Abstract

This paper critically examines Nadia Hashimi's 2021 novel Sparks Like Stars, which follows the life of Sitara Zamani, an Afghan girl who survives the 1978 Saur Revolution and lives in exile in the United States under a new identity. Through historical fiction, Hashimi explores memory, trauma, identity reconstruction, and the cultural dislocation felt by many in the Afghan diaspora. Drawing on trauma theory and diaspora studies, this paper analyzes how personal and national histories intersect in the narrative, revealing the enduring effects of political violence and the search for belonging. The study argues that Sparks Like Stars is both a work of remembrance and a testament to resilience.

Keywords: Nadia Hashimi, Sparks Like Stars, Afghan diaspora, trauma, memory, identity, exile, historical fiction

Introduction

Historical fiction serves not only to revisit the past but to reclaim silenced voices, personal histories, and cultural memories threatened by political upheaval. Nadia Hashimi's Sparks Like Stars (2021) stands as a powerful example of this genre, weaving together personal trauma, collective memory, and national history through the eyes of a single survivor. Set against the backdrop of the 1978 Saur Revolution in Afghanistan, the novel follows Sitara Zamani, a privileged ten-year-old whose life is shattered overnight by a violent coup that claims her family. Rescued by an American diplomat and forced into exile under a new name, Sitara— now Aryana Shepherd—grows into adulthood carrying the scars of a past she is unable to fully remember or share.

Hashimi, herself an Afghan-American writer and physician, brings a unique perspective to this narrative, blending historical events with psychological depth and cultural insight. Sparks Like Stars explores how trauma fragments identity, how exile creates both loss and

resilience, and how memory can serve as both a source of pain and a pathway to healing. The novel resists simplistic depictions of Afghan women as passive victims, instead centering female agency, survival, and the quiet strength that persists across generations.

This paper argues that Sparks Like Stars functions simultaneously as a personal story of survival and a historical testimony that preserves the cultural and human complexity of Afghanistan beyond its recent history of conflict. Using trauma theory (Caruth, 1996), diaspora studies (Hall, 1990), and feminist literary perspectives, this study examines how Hashimi portrays the interplay of memory, identity reconstruction, and exile in Aryana's journey. Ultimately, the novel becomes an act of resistance against erasure, showing that while trauma may fracture identity, remembrance can also restore a sense of self and cultural continuity.

Analysis and Discussion

Historical Trauma and the Child's Gaze

Hashimi's novel begins at a moment of violent rupture: the Saur Revolution. By narrating this historical moment through the gaze of a ten-year-old child, Sitara Zamani, Hashimi brings intimacy to a political tragedy. Sitara's descriptions of "the marble floors cold against my cheek" and the "smell of dust and gunpowder" reflect trauma's sensory imprint rather than a structured chronology, aligning with Cathy Caruth's (1996) idea that trauma resists narrative closure.

Sitara's memory freezes at the moment her family is murdered, echoing the phenomenon of "traumatic stasis" described by trauma theorists, where time feels suspended. The narrative uses these vivid yet fragmentary memories to emphasize the incompleteness of traumatic recall: Sitara can remember the color of her mother's dress but not her last words, revealing both presence and absence.

Hashimi uses these gaps in memory to illustrate how trauma survivors navigate life: by carrying incomplete stories that still shape their entire sense of self.

Identity Reconstruction and the Violence of Renaming

Antonia's decision to rename Sitara as Aryana Shepherd is presented as an act of protection yet also a form of symbolic violence. The name "Aryana" echoes Aryana's Persian roots, hinting at a connection to heritage, while "Shepherd" symbolizes her new, dislocated American identity. The narrative tension between Sitara and Aryana dramatizes Stuart Hall's (1990) concept that identity in diaspora is "never complete, always in process."

Aryana's success as a surgeon—a healer of physical wounds—contrasts with her internal fragmentation. Despite mastering a profession that demands precision and certainty, her own history remains a source of instability. Hashimi's deliberate irony here emphasizes that identity, unlike surgery, cannot be perfectly sutured.

This dual identity is further complicated by Aryana's reluctance to share her past with colleagues and friends, highlighting how trauma is both private pain and cultural history.

Exile, Displacement, and the Afghan Diaspora

Hashimi portrays exile as a multilayered phenomenon: geographic displacement, psychological exile from the self, and cultural exile from language and memory. Aryana feels estranged from both the Kabul of her childhood and the America where she becomes a doctor. This resonates with Homi Bhabha's idea of "unhomeliness"—a condition where the migrant lives on the threshold between cultures, belonging fully to neither.

Aryana's occasional sensory memories—a taste, a smell, a melody—become triggers, reminding her of her Afghan identity even when she tries to assimilate. Hashimi uses these moments to show that identity is never fully replaceable, and cultural memory persists despite distance.

Aryana's eventual return to Kabul underscores Hashimi's belief that physical return, while impossible to recreate the past, is symbolically powerful: it transforms nostalgia into active witnessing

Female Agency in the Face of Violence

Unlike many narratives of conflict where women are only passive victims, Hashimi's protagonist displays agency, even in childhood. Sitara survives not by luck alone, but by making decisions: hiding, trusting Antonia, and later, choosing medicine as a career.

The adult Aryana's choice of surgery is more than a profession—it becomes an unconscious attempt to control what trauma made uncontrollable. Healing others becomes her language of resilience. Yet Hashimi avoids romanticizing trauma: Aryana's strength does not mean the absence of pain but the decision to live despite it.

The novel also highlights women as both saviors and memory-keepers: Antonia saves Sitara; Sitara's mother embodies cultural continuity through lullabies and stories. Hashimi foregrounds Afghan women's roles as protectors of cultural identity even amidst political violence.

Memory as Witness and Resistance

Memory in Sparks Like Stars is presented as painful yet ethically necessary. By remembering, Aryana bears witness not only for herself but for a generation whose stories risk being erased by history's focus on later conflicts. Benedict Anderson's (2016) concept of "imagined communities" helps explain this: collective memory binds a diaspora together.

Hashimi's depiction of pre-war Kabul—its gardens, poetry, and architecture—offers readers a counter-narrative to the dominant images of Afghanistan as merely a site of conflict. By preserving cultural detail, Aryana's memories resist the erasure of a lost homeland and affirm the humanity of a people often reduced to victims in global narratives.

Thus, remembering becomes an act of cultural and historical resistance as much as personal healing.

Healing and Reconciliation

Aryana's return to Kabul is not portrayed as triumphant closure but as a difficult reconciliation. She revisits the palace, meets people linked to her past, and accepts that she cannot resurrect what was lost. Yet this return enables her to integrate her Afghan and American identities, moving from a fragmented sense of self toward wholeness.

Hashimi rejects the romantic idea that trauma can be "cured." Instead, Aryana learns to live with scars as part of who she is—a vision of healing grounded in realism and compassion. This aligns with trauma theorists who argue that recovery is about narrative integration rather than forgetting.

By the novel's end, Aryana's acceptance of being both Sitara and Aryana symbolizes not resolution but the coexistence of past pain and present strength.

Conclusion

Nadia Hashimi's Sparks Like Stars offers a nuanced portrayal of trauma, exile, and memory, centering an Afghan woman's journey from a child survivor to an adult who reclaims her story. The novel demonstrates how historical violence fragments memory and identity, but also how remembering can become an act of resistance and healing.

Hashimi complicates the idea of exile, showing it as both painful separation and a catalyst for resilience. Through Sitara/Aryana's story, Hashimi honors pre-war Afghanistan's lost beauty and cultural richness, resisting its erasure from global memory. By foregrounding female agency, the novel reframes Afghan women not as silent victims, but as active witnesses and preservers of history.

Ultimately, Sparks Like Stars transcends a single national tragedy to tell a universal story: that while trauma may leave indelible scars, memory—though painful—is what anchors identity and enables survival. Through remembrance, the past, however fragmented, remains alive, offering both witness and warning to the future.

Through Sitara Zamani's journey, Sparks Like Stars becomes both a personal story and a historical testament. Hashimi explores trauma's fragmentation of memory, exile's complex effect on identity, and the quiet strength of female agency. By blending personal and national histories, she memorializes a lost Kabul while affirming the resilience of the human spirit. The novel reminds readers that memory, even when painful, is essential for healing, resistance, and reclaiming identity.

References

Anderson, B. (2016). Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. Verso Books.

Caruth, C. (1996). Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Froula, C. (2014). Memory, narrative, and history in diasporic Afghan literature. Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 50(5), 577–589.

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), Identity: Community, culture, difference (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.

Hosseini, K. (2019). Afghan women's voices: Resilience and resistance in contemporary

fiction. Middle Eastern Women's Studies Journal, 11(2), 45–58.

Rahimieh, N. (2018). Displacement and memory in Afghan-American women's writing. Journal of Asian American Studies, 21(3), 371–390.