Bodhi International Journal of
Research in Humanities, Arts and Science

Vol. 10 No. 1 October 2025
E-ISSN: 2456-5571

Espionage, Loss and Trauma in Sreekumar Nair's *Interpretations: Scenes Behind 1971* War

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Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2025-OCT-057

Subject: English

Received : 24.09.2025
Accepted : 13.10.2025
Published : 31.10.2025

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n1.25.Oct057

Abstract

The research article primarily examines the representation of the emotional and physical turmoil experienced by Ranjith, an Indian Intelligence Officer who went undercover in Lahore during the 1971 war. The novel's engagement with historical trauma is deepened through depictions of personal loss, collective violence, and religious misogyny. Rather than circumventing the protagonist's pain, suffering, and memory, the narrative directly traverses them, compelling readers to confront the intensity of trauma. Significantly, the text distinguishes itself from Western aestheticized approaches to trauma representation by offering readers tools to access and engage with the protagonist's traumatic experiences. To underscore the interaction between the wound and word, the study draws on ideas from the postcolonial reorientation of trauma studies, as articulated by Greg Forter, Stef Craps, and Michael Rothberg.

Keywords: 1971 War, Indo-Pak War, spy fiction, historical trauma, territorial conflicts

Introduction

Sreekumar Nair's Interpretations: Scenes Behind 1971 War presents a gripping account of a patriotic spy who accepts a dangerous mission against the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War. Unlike conventional war novels that emphasize patriotism, heroism, and sacrifice in celebratory tones, Nair's narrative foregrounds the protagonist's vulnerability, psychological trauma, and unabated longing for familial intimacy. In doing so, the text destabilizes the singular image of the war hero and instead humanizes him as a figure caught between national duty and personal desire. The novel situates itself within the context of the 1971 war, following Ranjith, the Indian intelligence officer, as he undertakes a perilous mission to gather firsthand evidence of the Pakistani army's advancement along the Indian borders of Punjab and Kashmir. This offensive, strategically launched by Pakistan to divert India's support for Bangladesh's liberation struggle, is intertwined with Ranjith's personal anguish. While his official duty demands surveillance and intelligence gathering, his private quest remains unresolved: to trace his wife and children, who had been lost during the 1965 war.

The shadow of that earlier conflict also lingers in the presence of Indian soldiers still held as prisoners of war since 1965, deepening the novel's exploration of trauma, loss, and national memory.

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The novel provides a fertile ground to challenge the assumption that aporetic, silence-ridden, or deeply fragmented modes of modernist and postmodernist writing offer a universal model for representing trauma. In contrast, Nair's protagonist articulates his trauma with remarkable clarity, and textual signs such as his nightly journaling highlight the immersive depth of his suffering. Rather than disrupting or displacing trauma through experimental form, the narrative passes directly through it, mapping the landscapes of pain, loss, and longing in vivid detail. The novelist's approach invites readers to engage not with abstraction but with the palpable texture of suffering, a strategy that aligns with what critics describe as straightforward realist text. Likewise, Craps offers a reading of Aminatta Forna's Memory of Loveas follows is a fine example of literary realism, which does not derive its haunting power from the conversion of unspeakable suffering into a broken, traumatized speech, but rather from its acknowledgement of the existence of vast silence spaces of unknown, ongoing suffering in the face of which narrative therapy– to the extent that it is on offer– is an inadequate response. (Craps 57).

Nair's protagonist verbalizes his psychological anguish through nightly diary entries during his mission in Lahore. This narrative technique not only externalizes Ranjith's inner turmoil but also enables readers to witness the wider landscape of pain and violence surrounding him. On his very first day in Lahore, he records the public flogging of a woman for raising her veil, an act punished under rigid tribal codes. His diary also recounts a series of equally harrowing events: a young girl, Sakina, attacked with acid for attending school against local prohibitions; boys abducted from paddy fields and subjected to weapons training in preparation for the War, and the death of Kusum Chachi's only son in the riots followed by 1965 war due to his identity as 'Mohajir'. Through these observations, Ranjith not only documents individual suffering but also interrogates the state's complicity, recognizing that the government does not intervene but instead stays nonchalant to such structural violence against its own people.

Greg Forter, an early critic of trauma theory, argues that the psychology of trauma cannot be fully grasped if it is restricted to temporally bounded catastrophes such as sexual assault, genocide, or bomb blasts. He emphasizes that such events are often embedded within broader structures of social and political violence. Forter also draws on Laura Brown's concept of insidious trauma, which refers to the cumulative impact of microaggressions and everyday practices of marginalization. Unlike direct acts of physical violence, insidious trauma does not necessarily wound the body but rather corrodes the psyche and the soul through sustained exposure to systemic inequities and cultural oppression. Accordingly, Forter contends that when an author engages with structural trauma, firstly, the narrative must provide a deeper social context and backstories in order to illuminate the social fabric within which characters are imbricated.

In other words, for Forter, understanding structural trauma demands a deep dive into social history. Forter calls a second narrative effect of structural trauma "retro determination." Because the causes of such trauma often lie deep beneath the visible surface, individuals might be harmed by them without knowing the source of that harm. (Pederson 108)

Nair's narrative engages with the traumatogenic effects of the catastrophes Ranjith witnesses during his mission in Lahore. Through the protagonist's diary notes, the author reveals the oppressive codes of local tribes that harm their own people in the name of religion. Ranjith's encounter with Sakina immediately recalls the memory of his own lost daughter, establishing a poignant connection between individual stories and collective history. The narrative further discloses that Ranjith had lost his family in Muzaffarabad, in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, during the 1965 war, thereby deepening the personal dimension of his trauma within the larger context of regional conflict.The author channels the protagonist's psychological anguish into a narrative

that resists mere repetition of trauma. Instead, it offers a retro-determination that unfolds through revelatory insights into the socio-cultural fabric of history. In doing so, the text prevents cognitive transfixion by situating individual suffering within broader historical and communal contexts.

Alongside Ranjith's diary writing, another significant recurring element in Nair's narrative is the dream motif centered on the loss of his wife Khanu and their children, Suhali and Tanuj, during the 1965 war in Muzaffarabad. Khanu repeatedly appears in his dreams, and at times the narrative blurs the boundary between dream and reality, making it difficult for the reader to distinguish one from the other. The use of dreams as a narrative technique to represent trauma is both renowned and particularly apt in Nair's novel. Cathy Caruth, in Literature in the Ashes of History, underscores the importance of repetition and return as central to the experience of trauma. Drawing on Freud's observation, she highlights how trauma often resurfaces through flashbacks and dreams that function as compulsive repetitions of the original wound. In this framework, Ranjith's recurrent dreams of Khanu and his children serve as a powerful representation of his unresolved grief. The dreams do not open new imaginative possibilities but instead replay his lived horror, binding him to the loss of 1965. His substitution of Sakina for his lost daughter further exemplifies Freud's notion of repetition compulsion, where the psyche, unable to master the trauma, compulsively returns to it in displaced but recognizable forms.

The critic, Hartman finds a key example of such repetition in Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." As the coda of that work makes clear, the mariner feels compelled to tell the story of his hellish time at sea over and over again– to whomever will listen. These tellings soothe, but only momentarily: "The repetitions, too, though cathartic, suggest an unresolved shock: a rhythmic or temporal stutter, they leave the storyteller in purgatory, awaiting the next assault, the next instance of hyperarousal" (Hartman 55)

These dreams intensify when Ranjith returns to the site of his family's disappearance, as if memory and space conspire to reopen old wounds. The motif reaches a poignant moment when, after Sakina's kidnapping, Ranjith dreams of her as though she were his lost daughter. In this way, the narrative reveals how trauma restricts his imaginative capacity—he cannot dream beyond his lived horror but remains trapped within it. His substitution of Sakina for his lost children demonstrates the compulsive repetition of loss and highlights the fusion of personal grief with the collective suffering around him.

Ranjith tries to fall asleep only to stay awake in his dreams. The dream erupts again. Khanu and his Children are carried away and they try to reach out tihim. All the same, he could not do anything. Then a new dream comes. He sees Sakina coming towards him. She is not blind anymore. (Nair 78)

The idea of metaphoric entrapment in the narrative highlights the argument of Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's discussion on impossibility of metaphor within the concentrationary universe.

Citing Tadeusz Borowski's self-referential technique of drawing "images of comparison" from within that universe only: "like a blade of ice ...like a wet leather strap ...not a single prisoner, not one solitary louse". For Ezrahi, "the persistence in this literature of a factuality which does not allow for transcendence through metaphor is a reinforcement on the literary level of the brutal inexorability of concentrationary reality" (Hunter 78).

In Nair's narrative, this impossibility of metaphor takes shape through Ranjith's compulsive dreams and his diary entries, which return him again and again to the same site of loss. Like Borowski's images that remain bound within the concentrationary universe, Ranjith's visions never transcend his lived horror but remain locked within the factuality of pain and dispossession. His substitution of Sakina for his lost daughter exemplifies how trauma collapses boundaries between past and present, private grief and collective catastrophe. In this sense, the novel affirms Ezrahi's insight into metaphorical entrapment while simultaneously extending it into the South Asian postcolonial context, where trauma is narrated not through silence or fragmentation but through the relentless reappearance of wounds that resist closure.

Conclusion

Sreekumar Nair's Interpretations: Scenes Behind 1971 War challenges the Eurocentric assumptions

of first-wave trauma theory, which privilege silence, fragmentation, and aporia as the only authentic modes of representing suffering. Instead, through diary entries, dreams, and recurrent motifs of substitution, the novel demonstrates how realist strategies can render trauma legible without aestheticizing it. By foregrounding Ranjith's unresolved grief alongside the collective violence of war, Nair situates trauma within the broader matrix of structural and insidious violence, thereby expanding the scope of trauma studies beyond its Western psychoanalytic foundations. The novel thus underscores the necessity of acknowledging South Asian histories of loss and displacement as central to a pluralistic, global understanding of trauma. Ultimately, Ranjith's inability to imagine beyond his lived horror—his compulsion to replay the loss of his family through the figure of Sakina—stands as a poignant emblem of traumatic realism: a mode that traverses, rather than evades, the landscapes of pain, urging readers to confront the enduring wounds of a fractured subcontinent.

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