

# When Absence Becomes Identity: Rethinking Disappearance in The Shadow of the Crescent Moon

Areej Saad Almutairi

Areej Saad Almutairi, Associate Professor, English Department, University of Hafr Albatin

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**Abstract:** The authors analyze this story as an example of how enforced disappearance can generate identity through absence rather than erasure, not the erasure of it. By focusing on the relationships among Samarra, Hayat, and absent Aman in a political hotbed at a border, the article states that disappearance is a structuring force for creating narrative, memory and relational existence. One important piece of evidence "the way he used to fill the doorway" shows how language about space is able to create a continued presence of something that has been made absent; illustrating how absence is continuously experienced as a form of presence. "Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, the authors describe disappearance as a spectral presence, in which the thing that is absent remains present in our memories, in language and in our emotional/affective connections with others. In order to provide further context, the authors introduce the concept of "Absent-Presence Identity," which they define as a type of subjectivity that exists in relation to other people, and which is created through an ongoing emotional/mnemonic/narrative connection to the absence of someone/something (i.e., absent-presence) rather than through their actual physical presence/closure.

**Keywords:** trauma, authenticity, own-voices, war narratives, narrative form.

## 1. Introduction

"He used to fill the doorway." (Bhutto, 2013, p. 47) this sentence appears deceptively simple yet it captures the logic of disappearance in Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*. "Used to" alters the perception of the doorway, signaling relational and emotional dynamics. "Used to" creates the space for the missing person to be suspended between being present and erased. It also suggests that when someone disappears, they do not lose all connection to who they are; instead, disappearance allows individuals to create new connections to their identities based on past memories and future anticipations while still maintaining unattached emotional ties. In addition to portraying disappearance as a complete loss of an individual or entity, the novel consistently depicts disappearance as an ongoing process through which people continue to

construct and redefine their emotional lives outside of their physical presence.

The novel takes place in areas of tribal conflict close to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where the state is heavily dependent on military power, surveillance, counter-insurgency, and a general atmosphere of uncertainty (Foucault, 1978). Families' lives revolve around people who will never come back, hanging between hope and mourning. In such a situation, disappearance turns from being a mere political occurrence to becoming the structure that shapes time, relations, and memories. The waiting cycle repeats itself; the act of remembering becomes constructive instead of reflective (Hirsh, 2012), while identity forms based on uncertain relational continuities. Thus, absence can evoke emotions at least as strong as the ones caused by presence.

Contemporary studies of *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* have focused on violence, both political and military, experienced by the individuals, trauma and instability caused by post-colonial power struggles in Pakistan (Zainab et al., 2020; Zaidi et al., 2022; Nawaz et al., 2023; Pawlak, 2025). Research on the subject has greatly assisted in our ability to understand how the author uses conflict and marginalization to represent areas in Pakistan that are conflicted. For example, Zainab et al. (2020), explain that the violent acts portrayed in the novel disrupt social stability and everyday life. In addition, Zaidi et al. (2022) describe the disappearances portrayed in the novel as being caused by militarization and political struggles, and thus the primary cause of the disruptions. Moreover, Nawaz et al. (2023), describe how trauma creates emotional fragmentation in characters, and how those fragments create an environment of mental instability due to their experiences with violence and fear. Although those readings were productive in locating the novel in both post-colonial and trauma frames of reference, most disappearances in these readings are treated merely as erasure or rupture. Therefore, what has remained unexplored is how the act of disappearing itself, continues to produce new forms of identity related to emotionality, relationality, and narrativity after the individual disappears.

Therefore, to fill this void, this current study introduces the concept of "Absent-Presence Identity". This concept illustrates how identity continues to exist as long as there exists a relationship of emotional continuation, relational attachment, memory and narrative repetition even after the person physically disappears. As opposed to traditional identity theory based on physical presence or visible existence, "Absent-Presence Identity" portrays identity as existing beyond the experience of unresolved absence. The disappeared do not stop being socially and emotionally connected simply because they physically disappear; families continue to structure their lives around waiting for them, remembering them, speculating about them, and continuing to feel emotional connection to them. Thus, identity is no longer confined solely to memories of past events, stories told about the disappeared, silences regarding their fate, or hopes for future reunions but also encompasses a distribution of identity throughout memory, storytelling, silence and anticipation.

This study will build upon and expand several overlapping bodies of theoretical work including those of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), whose work demonstrated how marginalized communities lack stable visibility within dominant political systems. In addition, Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) work described identity as inherently fluid and negotiable regardless of whether one was displaced or uncertain. Furthermore, trauma scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1996), and Dominick LaCapra (2001) argued that unresolved violence continues to persist through repetition, memory and emotional returns rather than a complete cessation. Finally, Ahmad et al.'s (2022) argument that traumatic imagination works through narrative reconstruction and storytelling functions as a method of transforming gender-based violence into survivable and communicable memory structures also supports this viewpoint. Additionally, Jacques Derrida's (1994) concept of hauntology describes how absent figures continue to haunt the present through remnants and postponed meanings. However, while hauntology provides insight into spectral persistence, it fails to provide full explanation for how disappearance transforms relational identity itself. Therefore, this study posits that Bhutto's novel (Pourya Asl & Hanafiah, 2025) presents a form of identity created by absence rather than merely haunted by it. In terms of methodology, the research makes use of close qualitative textual analysis, along with interpretative reading that is reflexive (Berger, 2015; Jänicke, Franzini, Cheema, & Scheuermann, 2016) in order to analyze disappearance through narrative fragmentation, temporality, silence, memory, and emotional recursivity. The disappearance of people, such as the husband's or father's departure, provides a basis for the film to focus on scenes of waiting, broken up dialogue, unresolved narrations, and repeated allusions to characters who are not present (in this case, the husband) in order to illustrate how the disappearance of people can serve as a structural element for creating narrative meaning and not just as thematically relevant background.

This study argues that *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*, transforms the act of disappearance (as well as possible views on disappearance as an act of erasure) into a productive way of developing the conditions for identity in terms of instability, relational continuities and ongoing time ambiguity. This study develops the current body of scholarship in Postcolonial Literature Studies, Trauma Studies and Disappearance studies by creating a

new paradigm for enduring identity; so long as a person is missing.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarly literature on *\*The Shadow of the Crescent Moon\**, generally uses Political Violence, Trauma, and Gendered Oppression (Ringrose & Renold, 2014) as lenses by which to examine this work. These are important contributions to understanding how *\*The Shadow of the Crescent Moon\** portrays the impact of military occupation; fear; and marginalization in post-9/11 Pakistan. However, the problem with these perspectives is their reliance upon what might be called "presence-centered" models of identity. "Whereby subjectivity only exists if one is present, corporeal, speaks and socialized." Thus, when people disappear from public space, disappearance is commonly viewed as a loss, a rupture, or an erasure, rather than as a continued state of being that creates ongoing relational and narrative ways to define oneself.

Political Violence has been used extensively as a framework by which to critically evaluate *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*. For example, (Zainab et al., 2020), place the novel firmly within the "war on terror", demonstrating that militarized violence can greatly disrupt everyday life and social stability. Also, Fuchs (2025), explores surveillance, displacement and trauma as all direct results of State Control and political uncertainty. While both authors provide excellent analysis of the novel in relation to war on terror, regional instability and post-colonial violence and while they demonstrate the destruction caused by violence, they do not address how new identities emerge after physical absence. Recently, disappearance research has come to argue that disappearance should be viewed not only as a form of physical absence but also as a long-term condition of suspended recognition and un-resolved social existence (Edkins, 2011; Gatti, 2023). Trauma-focused interpretations emphasize similar ruptures, fears, and psychological fragmentations (Luckhurst, 2008). Drawing upon the larger scope of Caruth (1996) and LaCapra's (2001) trauma-criticism research, trauma studies demonstrate that the effects of violence can be transmitted via memory, repetition, and unprocessed emotions. But in contrast to trauma-related theories, those related to trauma generally center around the idea of psychic injuries and the difficulties of representing them. While these concepts are helpful to

understand some of the ways that disappearance functions in the novel, they do not entirely describe how the disappeared continue to shape social/emotional lives in the novel. For Bhutto's texts, disappearance is both traumatic and structurally productive of identity through waiting, memory, stories, and emotional attachments.

Similarly, feminist critiques have greatly enhanced our understanding of the representations of women in Bhutto's texts concerning women living under patriarchal systems and political conflict. Zaidi et al. (2022) explore how female characters functionally resist or find creative means to challenge their gender-roles when faced with a violent societal order. Similar to other types of feminist readings, these analyses help to identify how political violence interacts with forms of vulnerability and resistance based on gender. Yet, like many feminist readings, these analyses generally focus on issues of oppression and agency, whereas they do not consider disappearance as a structural feature of identity development. As such, the absent person continues to be an analytic secondary object — although absent people establish emotional and relational life in the novel.

Edkins' (2011) theory on disappearance, haunting, and the politically unresolved subject has been the most influential theoretical context for this study. Specifically, her work describes that missing persons exist in a liminal state (Gatti, 2023) that is simultaneously absent yet still recognized as present. By moving disappearance beyond simply being a matter of absence, Edkins (2011) asks about recognition, subjecthood, and politics. This type of conceptualization is central to analyzing Bhutto's novels, since the disappeared create narratives regarding family memories, emotional orientations, and narrative temporalities. Although Edkins (2011) centers the politically missing at the forefront of her analysis, this study builds off this perspective through its application to literary form. Thus, this study adds a new dimension to this body of literature by examining how disappearance transforms identity through narrative, emotionality, and relations.

In addition to supporting this intervention through Edkins' (2011) concept of hauntology and spectrality provide additional frameworks. Derrida's (1994) concept of hauntology outlines the mechanisms whereby the absent persist(s) within the present

through residues of memory, delay of meaning, etc. Similarly, Gordon (2008) posits that haunting refers to the residual pressures stemming from unresolved social violence. More recently, scholars of haunting/absence note that spectral figures disrupt linear timeframes and repeatedly emerge throughout a narrative through repetition (Fuchs, 2025; Pecastaing, 2025). Each of these frameworks provides significant background relevance to Bhutto's novels — the disappeared are active participants in language, silence and memory. Haunting however does not sufficiently account for how absence creates relational identities. The missing is not simply haunted by the present — they transform the structures of emotion and relationships used to sustain identity.

Therefore, there exists a methodological void in prior scholarly works. Previous readings generally asked how violence was represented in the novel — either through trauma, marginalization, etc., but rarely asked how literary forms construct identity using what is withheld, delayed or unresolved. Because previous readings relied heavily on presence-centered assumptions — therefore generally treated identity as something damaged by disappearance as opposed to constructed through it — therefore this study fills this void by creating "Absent-Present Identity" "a framework that explains how identity is preserved through emotional connection/continuity, relational ties/attachment, memory and narrative repetition post-disappearance. Therefore, this study moves past disappearance as a thematic issue examining it instead as a formal-relational process of constructing identity.

Beginning with Hauntology and Spectrality, this intervention provides additional justification for this analysis. Derrida's (1994) "Hauntology" outlines how the absent remains at issue in the present via traces, memory, and delayed signification. Similarly, Gordon (2008) has argued that the act of haunting signifies the continued force of unaddressed social violence. More recent research regarding haunting and absences also illustrates how spectral forms produce disruptions to linear temporalities and return to narratives as an ongoing process of repetition (Fuchs, 2025; Pecastaing, 2025). The above frameworks directly relate to Bhutto's novel as the disappeared remain active through use of language, silence, and memory. However, Hauntology cannot provide sufficient explanation of how absence can serve as the base of relational identity. The missing does not simply haunt the present; they transform the

emotional and social relationships upon which identity is supported.

As such, there is a significant methodology void within current studies on Bhutto. Current analyses generally pose questions about how the novel portrays violence, trauma, etc., while relatively few pose questions concerning how the literary structure creates/produces identity through withholding, deferring, and resolving. As a result of assuming identities are based on the presence of individuals, prior analyses have tended to view disappearance as damaging identity rather than producing it. This study will address this gap by developing and using a new analytical tool titled "Absent-Present Identity," a framework explaining how identity continues through emotional continuance, relational connection, memory and narrative repetition post-physical disappearance. Therefore, this study shifts from analyzing disappearance as a thematic aspect to examining disappearance as both a formal and relational mechanism of identity development.

### 3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to apply close readings using post-colonial theory, trauma studies and hauntology to explore how disappearance can function as an agent in the development of identity in Fatima Bhutto's *"The Shadow of the Crescent Moon"*. Unlike other research that viewed disappearance as either complete or symbolic absence, this study applied an approach to examining how the novel represents unresolved presence through narrative structure, emotional continuity, and relationship instability. While the study views the text not as a representation of political violence, it is viewed as a structural form of absence to organize time, memory and self.

Specifically, the study focused on the use of narrative devices such as waiting, interruptions, silences, fractured temporalities and recurring memories. Additionally, attention was paid to how the novel consistently delays closure through suspension of dialogue, interrupted narration, and changing types of epistemological uncertainty. The analysis of these narrative interruptions was studied not as mere stylistic ornaments but as specific formal methods in which disappearance continues to have an emotional and relational persistence. In particular, significant focus has been placed upon scenes where missing persons continue to influence the lives of characters through

their memories, speculations, stories, and un-resolved attachments. Thus, the study investigated how identities become distributed among emotional and narrative structures rather than being fixed through consistent physical presence.

Using a combination of post-colonial and hauntological theories, the study analyzed how the novel challenges notions of visible presence and coherent subject formation. Using Bhaba's (1994) concepts of instability and liminality the study interpreted identity as always being formed and re-formed under unstable political situations. Using Derrida's (2006) concept of hauntology, the study analyzed how absent figures continue to be present in all aspects of language, memory and narrative temporality. Finally, using selected concepts from trauma theory the study explored how unresolved violence continues to affect characters through repeated events of traumatic repetition, emotional return and delayed meanings.

Rather than attempting to interpret meaning into a clear statement at the end of the study, close reading was employed here to illustrate how the novel uses ambiguous and unresolved presence through its own literary forms. Therefore, the study concentrated on how pace, spatiality, focalization (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and interruptions influence readers' experiences with uncertainty and delayed recognition. As a result, disappearance was seen not just as a theme but as a fundamental organizational strategy in the way the story is told.

No claims were made regarding empirical generalizability (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Rather, the study provided a conceptual framework for examining how literary narratives develop identities through unresolved absence under the condition of political violence and emotional uncertainty.

#### 4. Analysis

As shown through the study of *"The Shadow of the Crescent Moon"*, disappearance is not the completion of an event, but instead continues to operate as a developing narrative situation that shapes both time and relations and the use of language. Disappearance is thus constructed through repeated acts of narrative disruption, frozen time, fractured point-of-view and iterative memory structures. Therefore, the novel cannot be said to simply depict those who are missing

as lost figures -- it creates absence as a continually operative mechanism for creating emotional experience and the meaning of the narrative even after disappearance has occurred physically.

An important example of this can be seen at the end of Chapter 6 when Samarra begins to think about her disappeared brother, "He used to fill the doorway" (p. 47) Bhutto. Although this sentence may seem straightforward in its construction, it uses grammatical structure to create both a temporal and emotional instability. The first element of the sentence, "he used to," is an analepsis or backward glance into past time. It is through this structure that the narrator places the reader in a current moment in relation to what was previously present. While the sentence is not describing memory per se, it is recreating absence through a comparison between what was physically present in a given space and what is now physically absent. Additionally, the doorway is being used as something greater than just a building component. As a liminal space, the doorway represents mediation between presence and disappearance, inside and outside, return and loss. Thus, although his body is no longer there, his physical size will continue to occupy emotional space in relation to the doorway as if some aspect of his presence continued to linger there.

In addition to showing how the novel utilizes focalized perception to spatialize memory, the above passage shows how the doorway's ability to do so is influenced by the fact that the narrator is moving through Samarra's internal consciousness. Because we see the doorway subjectively (i.e., emotionally), we should understand that what matters is not the doorway itself as an objective architectural entity, but the residual emotional effect attached to it. The body of the missing brother is physically gone; however, his body continues to exist in the world of memory through his physical size and emotional attachment. Thus, disappearance is not leaving space empty; it is filling it with the potentiality for deferred presence. The doorway continues to be haunted not through the supernatural's return; but, through memory and anticipation that have created continued relationships.

Waiting is further portrayed as a means to continue this state of suspension. There is one particularly long period of time that involves waiting at a family reunion. During this time, all family members are together in their house

awaiting the arrival of Aman (if he returns) or the realization that he has departed forever. During these sequences dialogue often breaks down, conversation becomes stilted due to interruptions by nature descriptions and narrative deferrals. The dialogue does become filled with questions that are not resolved and scenes are frequently displaced away from direct confrontation with emotion and onto everyday actions/objects. In other words, instead of propelling forward towards resolution or disclosure, the narratives have a structural delay in terms of time. Waiting thus becomes more than an emotional response; it is the fundamental organizational logic of all of the narrative time.

The suspended state created through waiting is evident in two ways. First, when Hayat asks, "Where is Aman?" followed by a series of narrative interruptions that displace attention away from the original question and focus on aspects of the environment rather than provide him/her an answer (Bhutto, pp. 112-113). The disruptions perform the act of disappearance formally. Instead of providing answers to unanswered questions, the narrative diverts attention via spatial and descriptive means away from resolving uncertainty and onto unemotional details of the environment. This allows for an external focalization where the narrative perspective pulls back from knowing certainty of character emotions and instead redirects attention onto unemotional elements of the environment. As such, this results in an unstable relationship between knowledge and uncertainty that is shared equally by both characters and readers.

The cited scene also proves that Bhutto uses fragmented focalization to disturb certainty in the same way she does with narrative pace. For example, "maybe he escaped" are moments of internal speculation that disappearance is continually countertheme by collective uncertainty expressed through phrases such as "no one knew" (Bhutto, 2013, p. 78). The fluctuating epistemic structure created between individual hope and communal uncertainty means that disappearance cannot be fixed into stable knowledge. The novel refuses authoritative closure and instead sustains contradictory possibilities simultaneously. Aman may be dead or hidden or returning but the novel intentionally preserves all possibilities without resolution.

This instability is also enhanced through free indirect discourse where emotional speculation merges with narrative voice itself. There are several moments in which the narration slips between character consciousness and external description without clearly differing them. As a result, uncertainty is embedded within the structure of narration rather than limited to individual psychology. The reader will often find it difficult to determine whether antecedent belongs to a character's inner hope or to the narrative's wider temporal logic. This blurring additionally intensifies the condition of suspended recognition that defines disappearance throughout the novel.

Memory in the text also works not just as passive remembering but as active reconstruction of identity. When Mina tells her daughter, "Your father liked his tea with three sugars," the detail appears at first glance trivial. Yet the specificity of "three sugars" transforms memory into material preservation. The absent figure is re-constructed through habitual detail, domestic routines and sensory repetitions. Taste routine and bodily preference become mechanisms through which relational continuity survives disappearance. Importantly, the father is not remembered abstractly but through ordinary interaction. This transforms memory from retrospective reflection into active maintenance of emotions.

The scene also demonstrates how domestic space functions as archive of unresolved presence. The preparation of tea becomes performatively repetitive through which absence remains social actively within the household. Rather than accepting disappearance as termination of family life, the family re-create relational continuity through repeated invocation of every-day practice and memorized gestures. Identity therefore becomes distributed across everyday practice rather than localized solely in physical embodiment. The disappeared continue existing relationally because emotional structures refuse complete erasure.

At the same time however, the novel occasionally presents moments where disappearance appears to produce silence rather than continuity. Certain passages depict emotional collapse, conversational collapse and failure of memory itself. In these moments, absence threatens to become real erasure rather than sustained relational presence. However, even these scenes ultimately support the broader structure of "Absent-

Presence Identity". Silence itself becomes narratively meaningful because the inability to speak continues to arrange emotional relations around the missing figure. The collapse of language does not eliminate disappearance from the narrative; rather it shows how extended absence has saturated emotional life beyond the limits of articulation.

The novel therefore refuses both complete presence and complete erasure. Instead, it sustains identity within unresolved oscillation between memory and loss, speech and silence anticipation and uncertainty. Through fragmented temporality interrupted dialogue recursive memory and unstable focalization, *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* constructs disappearance as generative narrative condition rather than final absolute absence. Identity emerges not despite disappearance but through the ongoing emotional and narrative structures that disappearance itself produces

## 5. Discussion

Conclusions drawn from this research show that the phenomenon of disappearance in the case of *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* cannot be explained through simple disappearance alone because it constitutes a continual process that reconfigures time and identity. It is not an act of complete erasure of people from society, since the disappearance is depicted time-and-time again as unresolved presence that continues to inform the lives of family members, friends and loved ones long after the individual's physical body disappears. This provides a challenge to the dominant conceptions of identity based upon embodiedness, visuality and stable social recognition by providing evidence that identity can endure through forms of unresolved relational connection, narrative reiteration and suspended temporalities. In this regard, disappearance is transformed from being a singular event of loss into a structure of continued emotional and narrative continuity.

While earlier post-colonial and cultural frameworks provide valuable insight into the instability of identity under violent and displacing conditions (Bhabha, 1994; Butler, 1990), they also do not capture the full scope of how identity is organized in Bhutto's novel. For instance, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) conceptualized identity as continually destabilized and negotiated within liminal zones characterized by uncertainty and displacement.

Similarly, Judith Butler (1990) demonstrated how subjectivity was produced through repetition and performative reconstructions. Both frameworks are able to account for much of the instability exhibited by Bhutto's characters due to their exposure to military violence and political instability. However, Bhutto's novel surpasses these two frameworks. Identity is no longer formed primarily through visible performances of identity or negotiations of culture. Rather, subjectivity is configured through unresolved absence itself. Thus, even though the characters continue to organize their lives in relation to those who have gone missing, it appears that disappearance transmutes identity into an enduring condition that persists through anticipation, memory and emotional endurance rather than through embodied presence.

The theoretical framework most closely associated with this particular condition of subjectivity is Avery Gordon's concept of haunting and "complex personhood" in *Ghostly Matters* (2008). Gordon argued that haunting occurs when unredressed social violence continues to affectively pressurize the present and allows erased or marginalized subjects to continue to existentially shape emotional and political experiences despite efforts to erase them through institutionally sanctioned processes of disappearance. A primary reason why Gordon's concept of haunting is relevant to interpreting Bhutto's novel is because the disappeared are not completely absent from the narrative world. They exist as persistent remnants through fragments of memory, suspended dialogue, repeated speculations about what happened, domestic rituals and emotional anticipations. Those who were physically removed continue to shape decisions, discussions and emotional cadences regardless of whether or not their bodies existed in the same space. However, Bhutto's novel takes Gordon's theoretical framework one step farther in terms of how socially erased people exceed the categories created for them by powerful structures of society (Spivak, 1988). However, in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*, disappearance does more than preserve remaining remnants of social existence. The emotional lives of survivors are structured around unresolved absences themselves. Therefore, identity no longer functions as a fixed entity situated within an embodied self; instead, it is distributed among relational networks of waiting, memory, storytelling and anticipation. The disappeared are not simply ghosts of violence that haunt the present as symbols of what was done to them; they constitute

parts of ongoing processes of becoming-subjects. Thus, Bhutto's novel transforms haunting from being a form of spectral return back into a relational structure through which identity continues to emerge.

This transformation can be seen particularly well in the way the novel presents domestic and emotional continuity. Daily gestures repeatedly inscribe absent persons into daily life so that disappearance transcends the institutions that erase these persons. Meals, habits, quoted phrases, and repeated waiting are all forms through which missing persons continue to exist affectively. While Gordon's (2008) theory on haunting describes how unresolved violence persists, Bhutto's narrative illustrates that haunting can be structurally incorporated into everyday relational existence itself. Missing persons are not preserved as subjects because they have physically returned; their existence is continually reconstructed through anticipations and memories. Furthermore, this situation shares parallels with Sharpe's (2016) conceptualization of "wake-work," where violent histories continue to organize relational and emotional experiences after physical disappearance or death has taken place.

In other words, the novel represents that presence is woven into the fabric of relational life every day rather than being relegated to an exception to trauma. The findings also undermine the relationship between disappearance and social death. Institutional mechanisms of violence endeavor to physically and politically efface individuals, yet the novel continually contests such a process of erasure through its continued use of narrative. Characters continue to speak about, remember and emotionally relate to those absent. Therefore, disappearance produces a paradoxical state where individuals become physically inaccessible while remaining emotionally constituted. Bhutto's narrative thereby complicates Gordon's "complex personhood" by illustrating how unresolved absence can subvert the dichotomy between social existence and social death. Rather than occupying either full presence or full absence, the disappeared are suspended within ongoing relational acknowledgment (Lisle, 2017).

The aforementioned condition has strong affinities to Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology. Hauntology is based on the premise that the absent continue to exist through their traces, deferred meanings, and spectral return, ultimately disrupting the distinctions between

presence/absence, past/present (Derrida, 1994). Bhutto's novel continuously exemplifies the conditions described above in its use of interrupted dialogue, fractured narration, recursive memory and unresolved speculation. The disappeared are brought back not through physical restoration, but through the everyday actions, memories and conversations that sustain the emotional ties despite the lack of materiality.

Moreover, in comparison to other works that engage in hauntology, the novel gives more weight to the continuance of relationships than to spectrality. The disappeared are not only spectral traces circulating through language, but emotionally constitutive characters whose absence continues to shape the everyday family dynamics and social interaction. In recent post-colonial hauntology narratives, unresolved absence (Fuchs, 2025) tends to supersede symbolical representation and gets entangled in everyday emotional practice of the community. Such elements as an empty room, a door, silence and repetitive rituals may no longer signify the process of mourning alone, but the structures that enable unresolved presences to remain involved in social life. This can be observed in the doorway passage where the physical space itself acquires an emotional quality of presence despite the physical disappearance of someone. Physical space becomes a place where the unresolved quality of attachment is preserved.

The results also complicate the current models of collective memory. Jan Assmann (2011), Erll & Nunning (2010), etc., have defined memory as the means to enable communities to maintain continuity between generations. However, the example of Bhutto's novel proves that the concept of disappearance undermines the continuity and transforms memory into endless uncertainty. The disappeared remain emotionally active due to the fact that there is no closure in their case. Thus, memory is no longer a tool to preserve past losses, but a mediator in the relationship between loss and unfulfilled attachment. Trauma studies conducted by Cathy Caruth (1996) and Dominick LaCapra (2001) assist in explaining how unresolved violence recurs through repetition, emotional endurance and delayed representation. However, Bhutto's novel indicates that disappearance elicits more than mere repetition of trauma. Those missing continue to structure relational identity beyond the psychological recurrence of violence. Identity is therefore not merely damaged by

disappearance; it is organized via continuing emotional systems generated by disappearance. This phenomenon corresponds with Christina Sharpe's (2016) concept of "wake work," which explains how violence generates ongoing relational and emotional structures that endure after physical loss and shape the ways in which subjects live in the wake of disappearance.

### 5.1 The Ethics of Absence as Identity

In addition to the aesthetic benefits of the "productive" approach, however, there exists a political hazard. There is a political risk in describing absence as productive. If disappearance generates identity, memory and relational continuities, does the potential exist to describe political terror as a necessary or even positive condition? While the novel itself explicitly does not come to this conclusion, this research study has clearly rejected any interpretation that would romanticize disappearance or legitimize state power.

By using the structural definition of "productive," this study does not suggest that disappearance is desirable, morally justifiable, or politically acceptable. "Instead, it describes how unresolved absence reorders emotional, narrative and relational systems despite the violence that creates it". The novel does not extol disappearance; instead, it illustrates the tremendous degree to which people are required to create meaning under continued uncertainty and suspended grief. The persistence of relational identity occurs not due to disappearance's utility but rather to the fact that emotional and social life cannot fully assimilate loss.

In contrast to aestheticizing disappearance, the novel depicts fragmentation, exhaustion and epistemic instability on a repeated basis. Families are thus caught between grieving and anticipating, unable to recover or attain certainty. Therefore, the use of silence, interruptions and deferred narration in the novel represent an ethical rejection of closure (as opposed to an aesthetic enhancement of suffering). The reader is repeatedly denied definitive knowledge about what occurred in the novel. Additionally, focalization is unpredictable and emotional certainty is consistently delayed. As a result of these two factors, the emotional condition of disappearance is reproduced in the reader. Thus, instead of viewing themselves as detached spectators observing uncertainty from outside of it, readers are structurally included in suspended recognition along with the characters. Therefore, the

novel transforms reading into an ethical engagement with incompleteness and the absence of resolution resists narrative control over political violence. In this way, unresolved narration becomes politically relevant inasmuch as it prevents both the State and the reader from attaining interpretive closure.

Additionally, the ethical refusal of closure in Bhutto's novel can be distinguished from those texts that ultimately transform trauma into eventual reconciliation or symbolic restoration. *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* retains uncertainty as a continuing state of emotional existence. The missing is never restored in their entirety and the absence of definitive revelation is an essential aspect of the text's formal strategy. The novel thus preserves the violence of the act of disappearance in the reader's interpretive space rather than encasing it definitively within the structure of a completed narrative.

Other examples of incomplete presence can be found in novels such as *Pedro Páramo*, which use fragmented narratives and ghostly populations to blur the line between life and death. Similarly, in Rulfo's novel, voices travel through time without fixed temporal limits and community identity is established by means of recursive memory and unresolved death. Like Bhutto's text, *Pedro Páramo* constitutes absence as a dynamic narrative condition through which emotional and communal continuity persist. The comparison therefore indicates that "Absent-Presence Identity" may have greater interpretive applicability across various genres including postcolonial literature, trauma literature and conflict literature which focus upon disappearance, haunting and incomplete recognition.

Ultimately, *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* reworks disappearance as a condition that is simultaneously relational and narrative. Through recursive temporality, haunting, fragmented focalization, interrupted narration and unresolved attachment, the novel defines identity as something maintained by absence (and not eliminated by it). By applying Gordon's notion of complex personhood to Derrida's hauntology in order to establish relational continuities, this study establishes "Absent-Presence Identity" as a theoretical model to understand how literary narratives transform unresolved disappearance into an ongoing construction of emotional, narrative and relational existence.

## Conclusion

In summary, this study clearly shows that absence functions as a structural foundation for forming identities in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*, as opposed to a "narrative void." Therefore, absence can be seen as a necessary condition of producing identity; absence is not the antithesis of identity but is the very precondition of it being possible under conditions of enforced disappearance. The novel illustrates how identity is continually created through relations with other individuals who are present and through systems of waiting, memory, and narrative interruptions. As such, disappearance has become an essential component of emotional and time-based experiences. Future studies could develop upon this structure and explore three areas. First, disappearances in a variety of narrative forms, including non-linear and fractured narratives from various postcolonial settings. Second, comparative analyses of gendered configurations of absent-present identities in conflict literature. Finally, the limitations of relational identity when disappearance creates total psychic rupture rather than continuity. Overall, Bhutto's novel implies that the "shadow" in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* represents a structuring force — a phantom or spirit that both hides and produces meanings, which reveal that identity is ultimately maintained in the space between presence and disappearance.

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