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Trauma, Testimony and Anticipated Peace in Singh's "The Silence of Violence"

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ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century the trauma theory has become an important way to understand a wide variety of contemporary events of exhausting wars and conflicts which have battered the contemporary societies. In the most general sense, it is used to examine the ways in which past painful experiences are processed with the help of literary texts. It further attempts to analyze different ways by which traumatic occurrences are demonstrated, processed, exposed, and expressed throughout a variety of literary and historical texts as a form of testimony. Subsequently, the authors as well as the victims might attempt to negotiate and resolve their own personal traumas with the help of their writings and sometimes with the help of fictional characters in their literary texts as they serve to record and pronounce cultural traumas. In Padhmavati Singh's "The Silence of Violence" which was written on the pretext of ten years violent conflict that took the lives of thousands of innocent people, one can find the characters and situation inextricably affected by trauma and she or he finds it hugely manipulated to bring out the post-conflict Nepali society apart from anticipating impatiently for long lasting peace and solidarity.

KEYWORDS: Conflict, survivor, traumatic experience, trauma theory, violence

INTRODUCTION

Erlil once quoted trauma as "crisis representation" (1) which has gained its prominence as part of poststructuralist thinking specially by Cathy Caruth in her work *Unclaimed Experience*. It can be seen as a sudden intrusion of new and unexpected knowledge into someone's psyche, usually due to a sudden confrontation with violence or death. It leaves the survivors emotionally and intellectually divided between what they felt or believed in before the event and what they at present know or believe in causing a psychic separation in identity or consciousness that ultimately leaves them confused, frightened and disturbed. It is also a constitutive failure of linguistic representation in the "post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Vietnam era" (3). It entices various fields. Trauma as deeply rooted in human psychology is part of psychic outcome of terrible effects of accidents, war and mistreatments that the victims undergo along with the speed of time. It should come as testimony in any forms. Here, physical wounds may get healed, but mentally such wounds never get recovered. In poststructuralist trauma discourse, "the Holocaust is held to have precipitated, perhaps caused, an

epistemological-ontological crisis of witnessing, a crisis manifested at the level of language itself” (Ibid). A traumatic event can even lead the victims to an immediate confrontation with reality or possibility of death, a real threat that helps one realize a new and sudden awareness of one’s morality and vulnerability, which upsets one’s psychic state. Later, in the twentieth century, trauma has been taken as a tropological hegemony in literary criticism in part due to the theoretically appealing quality to raise larger questions about the relationship between violence experienced by individuals and cultural groups or between victims, perpetrators, and witness. Cathy Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience* claims, “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it is precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Caruth’s model even focuses on repressive, repetitive, and dissociative nature of trauma as psychoanalytical referents. Padhmavati Singh’s “The Silence of violence” as a post-conflict narrative has brought out the traumatic facts of what Caruth, Erll and other theorists have penetrated while studying the post-war era phenomena which had impacted all human being living that time. The ultimate consequence of the events put forward in the story shows how the traumatized people are rigorously anticipating for the time of harmonious reconciliation in the war-torn Nepali society; and these people’s longing for solitary in the conflict-hit time sounds much plausible.

TRAUMA AND LONGING FOR PEACE

At the very turn of the 21st century, as trauma theory became prevalent in literature, theorists like Caruth, Erll, Lacrapa, Fellman, Daub etc. came forward with their theoretical approach to deal with literary works which would be written about the wars and conflicts and which have engulfed the 20th century very rigorously. Wastell is one trauma theorist who, while analyzing the phenomena of trauma has pointed out that survivors experience trauma when there is a disruption of a protective barrier in their mind, which protects them from harmful and painful excessive stimulation (1). In the same way, Wastell describing psychological trauma has stated, “Definitions of psychological trauma have been heavily influenced by medical models of physical trauma. An older definition of psychological trauma is exemplified by Drever”(xvi). Trauma has been understood as an emotional shock, producing a disturbance, more or less enduring of mental functions. The concept of ‘shock’ is central to this definition of trauma. This shock is “sudden depression of the nervous system or nervous exhaustion produced by violent emotion, accident, surgical operation, etc.”(Ibid). Such an approach leads to theorising that is biased toward viewing psychological trauma primarily as a physical injury to the nervous system. Thus, trauma can best be understood by only the survivors and their testimony in essence because it is only the survivors who must have undergone with traumatic experiences and still living with the horrible past.

Trauma is a subject of ideological and fiduciary struggle and has been radicalized, sexualized, gendered and classed from its inception. Likewise Erll has elucidated traumatic past along with memory of Holocaust and the cultural history of war and violence of the first or the second World War, Colonial wars, Slavery in the US, South African Apartheid, the Australian Stolen Generation or Indo-Pak Wars (3), and all individual and cultural trauma is used to represent memory.

Trauma has been a subject of interpretation of literary works and many critics have taken it as a major area of writing criticism. Wastell, a trauma critic, points out the most influential approach of trauma, which is based on cognitive behavioral model that focuses on the rational mind. He further notes, “Survivors are encouraged to address the residual effects of trauma using technique that essentially subsume emotion beneath

rational thinking”(vi). But Maurice Stevens has focused his study of trauma on the area of race, class, gender, sexuality and religion. They are very vulnerable fields to have people traumatized that would ultimately contribute to not only trauma studies but also medical, anthropology, cultural studies, psychoanalysis, critical, legal studies, critical theory and even performance studies(1). The nature of overwhelming fear, with its absence of signal anxiety, made one unprepared for the external traumatizing events; so the ego did not have time to prepare defense formations. She or he is subdued to the prevailing accounts.

Explaining psychological trauma, Sandra L.Bloom argues, “Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (2). The victims as much as they can, remain active in mind, but physically inactive. But Kolk points out, “Traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat” (3). Here, both critics have one thing in common; that is, it is not the trauma itself that does the damage. It is how the individual’s mind and body react in its unique way to the traumatic experience in combination with the unique response of the individual’s social upbringing. Bloom has tried to show a relationship between trauma and disassociation “safety valve” and has defined disassociation as “a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment” (7). It further helps people do more than one thing at once and traumatized people make special use of this capacity.

Such people can disassociate in different conditions. Fainting can be exemplified as an act of stopping consciousness. Psychogenic fainting is the brain’s way of saying “I can’t handle this” (Ibid). Fainting may lead victims to amnesia which can develop for entire identity and people commonly develop it for parts of their lives or just for parts of certain overwhelming experiences.

Trauma has been understood in different theoretical ways from its cultural to literary and psychological perspectives. But from the very beginning of its study, Michelle Balaev, a critic, has developed it as follows, “Beginning from a different psychological starting point for defining trauma than that established in the traditional approach thus allows critics a renewed focus on trauma’s specificity and the processes of remembering” (2). Understanding trauma, for example, by situating it within a larger conceptual framework of social psychology theories in addition to neurobiological theories will produce a particular psychologically informed concept of trauma that acknowledges the range of contextual factors that specify the value of the experience. This stance might therefore consider dubious the assertion of trauma’s intrinsic dissociation.

The study of trauma has had various dimensions of interest which may cover not only literary texts but also others. Balaev is in the view that there is an innate causality between trauma and dissociation (3). The idea that an extreme experience directly produces a dissociative consciousness wherein the truth of the past is hidden, supports Caruth’s claim that history functions the same as trauma in so far that history. It can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.

The phenomenon of trauma as referred to psychoanalytic-formalistic and cultural approaches is all related to victims and victimizers’ acts. In *Studies of Hysteria*, Sigmund Freud delineates, “the reminiscences that cause hysterical suffering are historical in the sense that they linked to actual traumas in the patients’ life” (186). The effects associated with the past trauma cannot be separated and the amnesia that results on the survivors is an outcome of the painful past of an ordinary denizen or a soldier fighting in the

battlefield. It is further elaborated by Caruth who views, “. . . trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled receptive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (*Trauma Exploration*, 181). The experience of the victim faced these horrible and catastrophic events and horrible scene with sudden and massive deaths around him, for example, who suffer this sight in a numbed state, only to relieve it later on in repeated nightmares, is central and requiring image of trauma in one’s century.

The catastrophic past event never let the survivors away from it, rather it haunts them time and again leaving a deep impact on them. But Jane Kilby, describing the pathetic condition of the victims in terms of their silence which can be caused due to various factors in the society, has figured out, “Originally, victim silence was figured in terms of social censorship; women remained silent because there was a taboo on speaking about sexual violence, not because they had lost the capacity to talk per se” (3). It was an extremely imposed silence. This conceptualization still holds for many, with victim silence still figuring as a consequence of social censorship manifest in any number forms, explicit and implicit. Kilby has focused her idea of trauma caused by social taboo and some other compulsions which make the survivors shut their mouth in front of others. They would not be able to speak about their pain and pathos lest their dignity might be in question. But Caruth opines differently on it delineating the mental apprehension of the survivors from the destructive violent events, “Trauma is constituted not by the destructive force of violent event but by the very act of its survival. If we are to register the impact of violence, we can’t therefore, locate it only with the destructive moment of the past but in an ongoing survival that belongs to the future” (*Trauma Exploration*, 20). It is because violence that inhibits incomprehensively the very survival of those who have beyond it that it may be witnessed best in the future generation to whom this survival is passed on.

Unlike Caruth, Kaplan points out condition of trauma which is being experienced by the people rather differently, “People encounter trauma by being a bystander, by living near to where a catastrophe happened, or by hearing about crisis from a friend. But most people encounter trauma through the media, which is why focusing on so-called mediatized trauma is important” (2). Being a participant, one can experience as painful memory as a victim would feel about the condition in which he or she would have a hard time to go ahead and has certainly gone through it.

TRAUMA AND LONGING FOR PEACE IN “THE SILENCE OF VIOLENCE”

Allan Megill, a trauma theorist, has pointed out that in the moments of crisis people often hark back to the past with amplified intensity, thereby valorizing memory (qtd. in Fierke, 37). At the same time, a traumatic crisis may involve a shattering of meaning and feelings of safety in the world, and an inability to speak of the traumatic event. The same kind of painful traumatic experience the storyteller Padmavati Singh in her story “The Silence of Violence” has shown in the context of the Maoist insurgency that took place in Nepal for about ten years of killing, disappearing and displacing many people, and ultimately leaving many dependents in a traumatic condition. This event which had been synonymous to terror for every denizen living in the country has distorted the deeply rooted systems and traditions being held for a long time. In the life of Nirmaya, the wife of a policeman, who has gone missing in the clash with the rebels at the police station it is nicely exemplified. The condition of her husband is narrated like this, “His whereabouts is all unknown, whether he has been abducted or killed or he has escaped and is hiding himself somewhere else. No authority has confirmed whether he is

dead or alive. She is writhing alive like a fish sizzling in the glowing heat of fire” (Singh,79). So, she is seen to have been raped by the rebels at her own home after serving them food and has been undergoing with the mental treatment in the rehabilitation center.

Along with Nirmaya, Singh has shown the anguish of an old lady whose only son “was slain by the security force some days back. Never did she know anything about his joining the rebels under the frivolous influence of his friends who were fleeing to a city in search of some job. After his friends told her about his killing, she keeps on screaming out relentlessly”(80). She remains crying and calling her son saying “Kancha. . . . Kancha” (Ibid). She further explains her situation, “The leaden sky began to shower as rain as if having heard her wails. All the woods along with her seemed to be shading the showers of tears, but nobody else is capable enough rescue her from the ocean of sufferings” (Ibid). Her condition is traumatic as she finds everything wailing along with her.

Apart from this, the painful suffering of Bisnumaya is even more painstaking as her innocent husband was assassinated by the rebels in front of her on the suspicion of having spied, slitting his throat open. The writer narrates, “A gang of rebels seized her house. Because some enemy had told the tale about him, he was killed despite being innocent”(82). Now she is at the rehabilitation center and undergoing with the treatment of trauma that is haunting her time and again.

The painful stories of Ramaniya, Lakhidevi, Malkhamai, Pawankali and so on are heart-stricken to all who have lost their either family members or themselves victimized either by rebels or security forces, but for Nirmaya, it is a way to consolation that she has got her own less than those of others. Her reminiscence recounts actions and interactions with others which, if repeated over time and magnified would become habitual. A traumatic memory of humiliation, when experienced repeatedly, may “become habitual, thereby structuring the practices underpinning identity and relationship to others, such that the previous life is mirrored in the present as it is habitually acted out” (Fierke, 35). Seeing others’ suffering, she has made her way out.

Still the very memory of her rape by the rebels cannot reverberate from the gloom of tragedy, that ultimately leads her to the stay in the center with other; which would make her different from others. She is panicked thoroughly inwardly and outwardly even seeing her own relatives or friends, she is not in the condition to know and treat them normally. Her pain which she cannot express outwardly is being expressed by the tears flooding from her silent eyes which would be expressing her trauma silently. It is narrated in this way,

Nirmaya, terrified and deeply resentful, kept on climbing up the mountain of sufferings, lying like a senseless log on the floor. The ocean of suffering surged in both of her eyes. Her patience smashed into pieces. She found herself stripped naked into hundreds of pieces. Pressing both her hands hard against the victim of the rape, she fainted in the silence of violence, feeling as if the ocean of pains was surging in her stomach She forced herself to stand up, but fainted and collapsed on the floor again. (81)

Neither she could sleep at night nor have rest throughout the day as the painful memory has traumatized making her unable to live up quietly.

In the story Nirmaya “keeps tossing and turning in bed, getting extremely worried and restless with stark fear” (79). The traumatic memory of her horrible past would be unbearable. To explain the condition like this, Caruth notes, “The traumatic reliving, like the nightmares of the accident victim, seemed like a waking memory, yet

returned, repeatedly, only in the form of dream” (*Trauma Exploration*, 152). Hoping a happy dawn in the life of all victims is once dismantled when she finds that her husband has forgotten all his past life as he “lost his memory after being deeply wounded in the head in the clash. His past is lost in the fog of his memory” (Singh, 84). She does not have anything except accepting the truth that she is having; which is unspeakable to her, but she is expressing her inner pain as testimony, like this, for

Drenched with sorrows, Nirmayas cast her eyes brimmed with tears on her husband, no difference has occurred in his ever bright lively face and stout physique. The only difference is his unfamiliar look, which does not have the feeling of warm intimacy...She looked numb and kept on staring at her husband disappearing into the distance, who shone like the moon in the sky for just a moment and disappeared into the horizon. She could neither burst not tears nor utter any words, nor could she go, following her husband....the fire was burning inside her which will one day erupt like a volcano to back up those citizens who have forgotten to laugh, whose smiles have been snatched away and who are burnt alive and are crushed in the violence. (85)

Had her husband been good in health and able to understand her condition of being victimized, her life would have been better and living with him happily.

But living in the rehabilitation center, she would have only one thing to do – reminiscing her horrible past that is very traumatic to her. Sometimes, even she has aggression on the leadership, which is not able to do anything to bring peace and solidarity in the nation. Such conflict has definitely “destroyed the lives of the people: who is benefitted from this conflict? Who will compensate this substantial loss of life and physical infrastructure? When will these series of killings, violence, rape, and destruction cease?” (84). But her futuristic queries remain unanswered for a long time in the far future.

Thus, the story, written as a testimony of what the main character, Nirmaya saw, endured and underwent through the severe painful condition as witness; which subsequently makes the readers feel what insurgency was like during the tenure. The writer is successful in presenting the trauma of the victims of this bloody insurgency with the help of characters Nirmaya, Ramaniya, Lakhidevi, Malkhamai, Pawankali and so on. The traumatic situation presented here, is a yardstick for the testimony of the civil war. But each of the victims is longing for love, compassion, peace and reconciliation in the war-torn society.

CONCLUSION

The situations like this, have made many people such as rebels, literary figures, victims, etc. imprinting the decade-long conflicts and their experiences in written forms. They have presented many characters that resemble actual experiences forborne during the conflict, have undergone with trauma – the painful past, suffering, facing death and threats each time. They are the specimen of the victims of painful horrific past, who may be among the kin of the above mentioned traumatized people or more than one hundred thousand displaced people. They have not yet forgotten the misery. Hence, like Nirmaya, they are in trauma, the suffering in any way from which they have not escaped yet because they cannot forget their past which every time haunts them.

The world including Nepali society which was battered by the strokes of war and conflict, has witnessed many painful events and taken different measures for presenting testimony. Now, to get relief from this traumatic situation, they can take refuge to - the process of peace and reconciliation - the sole solution to heal their painful past and to

lead them to the path of peace, brotherhood and reconciliation. They can once again live together in the same society harmoniously.

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