

Literature of Trauma: A Cathartic Apparatus

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Abstract

Recently, trauma studies have gained a remarkable attention in literary theory and criticism. Researches about the texture of traumatic experiences call for a novel avenue to the interpretation of trauma. The manifestation of post traumatic experiences pose intense dilemma for both representation and comprehension. Fictional narratives have taken a profound place in illuminating personal and public aspects of trauma as literature accommodates both inaccessible and incomprehensible. The sober sides of narrative fiction can be much more effective and popular in defining the trauma of catastrophic events than the texts offered by institutionalised history and media. The text of narrative fiction not only subsidizes the development of shared public memory of trauma but also provides specific instances of all efforts to cope with it. Theoreticians of trauma have acknowledged that the study of trauma emanate an acute instance of a cross disciplinary problem for it falls within the compass of no single journal or discipline. Therefore, approaches to trauma cuts across generic and disciplinary boundaries. Film, sociology, literature, psychology and the neurosciences currently correlate in coming to terms with trauma and identifying the role of post traumatic testimonies in such an attempt. Certain styles of narrative render traumatic events very powerfully. While non narrative forms supplement and compliment the narrative representation in comprehending trauma. The interdisciplinary effort on trauma has challenged what was once perceived by the medical establishment as individual pathology and has linked trauma to cultural attitudes and socio political agendas and expectations.

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The word “trauma” comes from the Greek word meaning “a wound”. In medical science, trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to tissues of the body, more frequently now injury to the tissues of the mind, as a result of a disturbing experience. Traumatized people often scan the surrounding world anxiously for signs of danger breaking in to explosive rages and reacting with a start to ordinary sights and sounds; all these takes place against a numbed gray background of depression, feeling of helplessness, as the mind tries to insulate itself from further harm. It involves a continual relieving of some experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashback and hallucinations. Trauma finds use in many different context and vocabularies. As in psychology, in literature the stress is more as to how people react to or are affected by certain overwhelming events than the

traumatic quality of the events themselves. Trauma can result from constellation of life experiences as well as from discreet happening, a persisting condition or from an acute event. The stresses of such extraordinary catastrophic experiences shatter the individual's emotional senses and finds repercussions in one's behavioural patterns as a set of conscious and unconscious actions that limits the ability to act or respond appropriately.

The emergence of trauma theory has provided novelists a new way of conceptualizing trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered. Trauma fictions signal the recent journey of the concept of trauma from medical and scientific discourse to the field of literary studies. The desire among various cultural groups to represent or make visible specific historical instances of trauma has also contributed to the rise of trauma narratives. Recalling and testifying to a painful past and portraying the effect of catastrophe and oppression on the individual psyche have become important for many writers of trauma. As Dominic La Capra puts it,

“A great deal of modern literature and art can be read, as a kind of relatively safe haven in which to explore post-traumatic effects.” (Writing History, Writing Trauma 180).

Trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Fellman and Geoffrey Hartman made a surprising journey from literary criticism to trauma studies revealing the way in which the two areas could be linked to become mutually beneficial.

Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, combined essays and interviews by literary theorists, film makers, sociologists and psychiatrists in order to emphasize the trans-disciplinary nature of trauma studies. Shoshana Fellman along with Dorey Laub drew on their personal experiences of their survivor accounts to present the first theory of testimony, a radically new conception of the relation between art and culture and the witnessing of historical events. Geoffrey Hartman underlines the truth that in literary studies, interpretation is constructed as a binary process which takes place between the active subject, the reader and the passive object, the text. Trauma theory readjusts the relationship between the reader and the text making it an ethical process opening out in a public and mental health issues.

Trauma narratives or literature of trauma go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or in characterisation; that also incorporate the rhythms, process and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of the works. The writers give importance to the reconstruction and recuperation of traumatic experiences. Literature of trauma can be comprehended by the identity of the experienced author. It develops from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience to make it real to the victim and the community. It serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatised author. Hence, one of the important themes in literature of trauma is the urge to bear witness, to testify to the world the truth of their experience. Elie Wiesel a holocaust survivor asserts:

I never intended to be a philosopher or a theologian. The only role I sought as witness. I believed that having survived by chance. I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told. Not to transmit an experience is to betray it... (qtd.in Tal 120)

Jill Morgan a victim of childhood abuse speaks out:

Only by owning myself and my past, by affirming and conforming my innocence in the whole, sordid drama can I rest and feel comfortable with myself. If my survival is to be meaningful at all to me, it must be because it gave me the strength to fight, the will to survive and the empathy to reach out to other women. (qtd.in Tal 120-21)

Untraditional narrative modes and technical innovations have expanded the possibilities for expressing trauma in fiction. Contemporary narratives combine elements of auto biography, fiction, biography, history and theory while representing the self. The basis for any interpretation of the literature of trauma is therefore, an underlying theory that explains the human need to tell stories. Trauma theorists consider responses as fundamentally pathologic and the act of speaking or narrational as primary avenue to recovery. The arguments of cognitive scientists of supporting evidence here. The most important suggestion is that every story has in its heart what Kali Tal identifies as the “pursuit of goals” (Worlds of Hurt 133), that is there are purposes of telling a story. Narrative helps to present things in a more acceptable, socially approvable way, and to gain a sort of emotional purging in the ongoing process of storytelling, memories and desires surface, the story teller is able to control the past, invent neat endings, and include revisions, emendation, explanation and fictions. Kali Tal notes that according to psychiatrist Alice Miller, the girls and women who are most damaged are those who are unable or prevented from voicing their anger and pain. Survivors who were endowed with literary or artistic talents were able to develop or reconstruct damaged functions effectively; they can recover from their post-traumatic problems, can integrate and heal themselves to significant degree.

According to Cathy Caruth, “To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event. Insufficiently grasped at its time of occurrence, trauma does not lie in the possession of the individual, to be recounted at will, but rather acts as a haunting or processing influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is moreover experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition. Freud has called this as “traumatic neurosis”. The Freudian concept of trauma and memory emphasizes the necessity to recreate through narrative, recollection of experience. Caruth speaks of trauma producing speechless terror in the individual, which is beyond direct representation, but literature, with its indirectness, figurative language and linguistic particularities can transmit the force of a traumatic experience. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth establishes that the story of trauma, as a narrative of belated experience, is more than the telling of an escape from reality, the escape from death or from its referential force, but an attestation of its endless impact on life. Caruth finds at the core of many trauma narratives, “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a “crisis of death” and the correlated “crisis of life”: between the story of unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survivor”.

If literature is primarily storytelling, then psychology is interested in the way human beings cope with trauma by narrating experiences. When trauma is written as text, it transcends the personal and becomes metaphor. That storytelling can heal psychic wounds and aid in survival is validated with the analysis of literary works that have been produced by men and women who have suffered trauma. The traumatised protagonist

exposes a unique personal experience, but also conveys the point that the event was experienced by a group of people either historically based or prospectively imagined. Thus, Scriptotherapy, a healing through narrative is fast becoming a means of alleviating trauma.

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