

## **Trauma of Violence and Displacement in Literature: A Theoretical Perspective**

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**Abstract:**

*In the contemporary world of social, religious and racial confrontations, the application of trauma theory has got a new relevance which is significant not only in Medical Sciences but also in Humanities. From the ancient notion of trauma as an external physical injury, the term got changed its definition to a morbid psychical condition essentially related to human mind. When an individual faces series of tragic events as part of social, religious or racial confrontations, it leaves a permanent wound in the human psyche which makes him or her mentally lost and disconnected. The psychological responses to such traumatic incidents happen in an uncontrolled way where repetitive intrusive memory of events, hallucinations and dreams become an everyday phenomenon. Over the centuries, the history of mankind has faced several tragic events including wars and genocides that shocked and tormented their psyche for decades resulting in traumatic psychosis. Since literature is the mirror of the era in which it is written, it has no escape from depicting these tragic events as well through both fictional and non-fictional narratives. Moreover, these narratives offer the readers an alternate reading of history that had been neglected*

*by official historiography. This fictionalization of events from history offers the psychological reading of characters, their mental responses to such tragic events, and It's traumatic after effects through applying trauma theory.*

**Keywords:** *Trauma, memory, script therapy, displacement, exile, violence.*

Trauma study is an umbrella term that comprises psychoanalysis, cultural studies, post-structuralism, philosophy and history. Though American Psychiatric Association first included Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as an illness in 1980, Freud's work with hysterical women were clearly its historical antecedents. The essential impetus provided by Freud in the field of Trauma has now been extended by theories such as New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, Post-colonialism, Marxism and Cultural Studies. The contemporary Trauma theory was developed in early 1990s by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman, a group of academicians from the USA. They were

the disciples of deconstruction theorist Paul de Man at Yale University. Their research in the field has drastically changed the relationship between literature and trauma. The impact of this development is so immense in such a way that it established trauma theory as an important branch in literary studies. Moreover, a new genre of trauma fiction has been developed in the field which attempts to represent trauma through literary devices and techniques such as flashbacks and repetition.

Owing to its interdisciplinary connection, Trauma Studies has received extensive critical attention from scholars all across the world in the recent years. A group of theorists led by Cathy Caruth believes that trauma cannot be expressed in narratives due to its inherent linguistic inexpressibility. They dismissed the ability of language to completely express such traumatic experiences into literary narratives. On the other hand, another group of theorists led by Judith Herman believes in the purgatory effect of retelling trauma through narratives. According to them, the recounting of such traumatic events can purify the haunting memories of past. The victim recovers from traumatic memory only when he/she is able to integrate such tragic experiences into an “organized, detailed, verbal account oriented in time and historical content” (Herman 177). Moreover, it has the power to heal the psychological wounds inflicted upon the victims. As Robert Folkenflick rightly points out, it serves as a “writing cure” for the tormented (11).

In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy engages in exploring how trauma is represented in contemporary fiction through analyzing the trauma fiction of Toni Morrison, Dorothy Allison, Jamaica Kincaid and Larry Heinemann. Vickroy’s study is a significant attempt to explore how the contemporary trauma narratives vividly represent the personalized responses of catastrophic events on individual psyche. Through unravelling trauma and its multidimensional effects, Vickroy establishes the relationship between social catastrophe and the psychological well-being of an individual. Traumatic events need not necessarily be violent or bloody to wound the human mind. In this line, Laura S. Brown has introduced the notion of “insidious trauma”, according to which “the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment, but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (103).

Trauma writing serves two major purposes; first is to review traumatic experiences through personal stories of people involved, secondly to offer voice to the voiceless victims of such events. The trauma of displacement impacts mainly at two levels: personal trauma which is experienced individually and collective trauma experienced at community level by a group of people resulting in collective sentiments. Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud’s concept of ‘talking cure’ and Carl Jung’s belief in the healing power of self-narratives in the life of a traumatized

victim are classical examples that substantiate the notion that the recovery from trauma is through verbally narrating the experience of suffering. Suzette A. Henke has called it as “script therapy” which is defined as “the process of writing out and writing through a traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic re-enactment” (xii-xiii).

Trauma writing not only serves a therapeutic function but also bridges the gap between different cultures through establishing a cross-cultural solidarity that recognizes the sufferings of the other. Earlier, trauma studies were mainly a Eurocentric affair neglecting non-western texts untouched. However, a group of postcolonial thinkers and critics like Sam Durrant, Jill Bennett, David Lloyd, Leela Gandhi and Rebecca Saunders have recommended including Asian and other non-western texts in order to widen the scope of this study.

Cathy Caruth’s edited volume *Trauma: Explorations In Memory* (1995) has laid the foundation of trauma theory as an interdisciplinary theory that incorporates different fields such as psychology, clinical studies, psychiatry, literature etc. Shoshana Felman believed in the therapeutic ability of trauma writing not only at personal level but also at social level. According to him, trauma fiction can transcend the textual boundaries and can reach out to the real world by suggesting solutions to real-life problems. Geoffrey Hartman contributed greatly in the development of Trauma Studies through two of his magnificent works *On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies*

and *Trauma within the Limits of Literature*. For Hartman, trauma writing as “literary verbalization... a basis for making the wound perceivable and silence audible” (259). The other significant works that enhanced the scope of trauma studies are Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence-From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s edited volume, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992).

Cathy Caruth through her books *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1995) explores the psychoanalytic nature of trauma through the lens of Paul de Man’s deconstruction theories and analyzes the unavoidable interaction between history and trauma. To support the claims of Caruth, Felman and Laub in their work *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992) explores how trauma of witnessing the horrible sequence of events associated with Second World War has been depicted in selected texts, films and documents.

In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1994), Judith Herman claims that the verbal representation of trauma as a necessary pre-requisite psychological healing as well as to interlink personal memory with the public world. According to him, the narration of traumatic memory of events can cure even cases of critical PTSDs. He considered trauma writing as a purgatory

tool not only at personal level but also in the public domain where realities are confronted. He further explains how trauma impacts human body in the following words:

Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured, defiled. Control over bodily functions is often lost; in the folklore of...rape, this loss of control is often recounted as the most humiliating aspect of the trauma. (52)

Geoffrey Hartman in his "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies" considers writing as a major tool to review traumatic events as well as to historically record the subjective realities associated with Holocausts. It was Anne Whitehead who introduced trauma theory in the domain of novel writing through her famous work *Trauma Fiction* (2004). In this work, Whitehead also explores the scope of trauma studies in the novels of Toni Morrison, Caryl Phillips, Anne Michaels, Pat Barker, Jackie Kay and W.G. Sebald. She confirms the ability of fiction to represent trauma through its creativity, innovation and literary devices.

In *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), Vickroy analyses the major novels of the modern times including Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz*, Marguerite Duras's *The Lover* etc. to trace the elements of trauma in fiction. This study closely scrutinizes the personalized responses of these authors to traumatic events using trauma theories thereby examines the complex relationship

between trauma and identity formation. Dominic La Capra, another pioneer in the field of trauma studies and intellectual history, is more concerned about the historical aspect of trauma writing. His famous works in the domain of trauma studies are *Writing History*, *Writing Trauma*(2000) and *History and Memory after Auschwitz*(1998). In *Writing History*, *Writing Trauma*, La Capra analyses the attempts of critics and theorists in dealing with trauma and holocaust testimonies.

Roger Luckhurst in his famous *The Trauma Question* (2008) attempts to explore the relationship between cultural memory and trauma. In *Trauma Studies*, memory occupies a quintessential role in diverse forms such as historical memory, cultural memory, transgenerational memory etc. Luckhurst begins his study by describing the complex symptoms of trauma:

Individuals who experience wars, disasters, accidents or other extreme 'stressor' events seem to produce certain identifiable somatic and psycho-somatic disturbances. Aside from myriad physical symptoms, trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in peculiar ways. The first cluster of symptoms relate to the ways in which 'the traumatic event is persistently re-experienced'- through intrusive flashbacks, recurring dreams, or later situations that repeat or echo the original. Weirdly, the second set of symptoms suggests the complete opposite: 'persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma' that can range from avoidance of thoughts or feelings related to the event to a general sense of emotional

numbing to the total absence of recall of the significant event. A third set of symptoms points to ‘increased arousal’, including loss of temper control, hyper-vigilance or ‘exaggerated startle response’.

(1)

The essential question central to trauma studies is- how much of trauma can be expressed in fictional or non-fictional narratives? Since traumatic experiences get partially removed from the psyche and return as broken images and obsessive behaviors, the victim finds it difficult to completely represent such emotional trauma through verbal expressions. Hence, trauma can be represented in literature through narrating tragic events such as displacement, physical violence and relocation with spatial-temporal details. Cathy Caruth supports this stand when she suggests that the representation of trauma is through temporal and spatial references like violence, physical abuse, and displacement and camp life. Anne Whitehead slightly counters this in her *Trauma Fiction* when she acknowledges that trauma can be represented by means of literary devices and techniques, such as ellipses, repetition, fragmentation, tropes, recurring motifs, etc. (85).

The UN Commission on Human Rights had defined internally displaced people as: “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human made disasters and who have not

recognized State border”. Robert Cohen and Francis M. Deng even associate the predicament of internally displaced with that of refugees crossing international borders. They are refugees in their own nation where their basic civil rights and human rights are consistently violated. Moreover, displacement is not merely a geographical dislocation but a complete breakdown of social, cultural, religious and emotional bondage shared at a community level. Like a fish taken out of its own aquatic habitat, a displaced person finds it difficult to emotionally integrate with the new settlement where he feels socially, culturally and psychologically alienated. Their memories of the past haunt them in such a way that the feeling of social and psychological alienation becomes integral in their everyday life. Mostly, they suffer from a mental health condition termed Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which is the direct outcome of terrifying traumatic events that they witnessed during the exodus. Its symptoms include recurring memories and dreams about traumatic incidents during the exodus, involuntarily re-experiencing such events as if it is happening in the present through flashback mode of memory, recurrent disturbing nightmares about such events etc.

The world-renowned migration theorist Susan Martin in her work “War, Natural Disasters, and Forced Migration” categorized displacement into two types: one induced by natural disasters such as flood, landslides, earthquakes, etc. and the other caused by conflicts such as war, communal riots, etc. The conflict induced displacement can be considered as an

aspect of forced migration where displaced people cross boundaries as refugees in search of social and political rehabilitation. As Susan Martin rightly points out:

Forced migration often involves trauma, dislocation and abrupt change in life. At a minimum, the displaced may face emotional problems and difficulties in adjustments resulting from loss of family and community support. More serious mental health problems may arise from torture and sexual abuse prior to or after flight. (65).

The term displacement combines two major concepts of dislocation and replacement which are correlated yet distinctive at both physical and mental realms in the process of memory formation. In their work *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider claim that the present era is witnessing a rise in the post-national cosmopolitan memory. The forceful displacement of people from one geographical location to the other can be either permanent or temporary. If the displacement is permanent and no essential steps are taken by the official authorities to restore the basic human rights of the displaced, the sense of emotional distress and mental trauma intensifies. Displacement is not just migration across the places, it is the forceful social, cultural and psychological uprootedness of both an individual and a community. What torments a displaced person is the loss of his own place to which he/she is socially, culturally and mentally bonded. Since literature is the mirror of the age in which it is written, displacement has offered

writers an opportunity to deal with various themes associated with it such as trauma, memory and lives in exile. The literature of displacement responds to the problems of the displaced and their deep-rooted agony of being alienated from their own culture, commune and customs. In the modern world of political, religious and racial confrontations, the scope of literature of displacement has increased significantly.

When people are abruptly displaced from their homeland, they experience homelessness, alienation, and psychological trauma. The nostalgic memory associated with home obsesses their thoughts in such a way that they start idealizing it as an island of Utopia. Home has a quintessential role in the life of an individual not only as a physical location but as a mental space where he/she feels mentally safe and satisfied. William Safran in "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" describes this affinity of immigrants towards their homeland in the following words:

Expatriate minority communities that are dispersed from an original center to at least two peripheral places, that maintain a memory, vision or myth about their original homeland' that believe that they are not- and perhaps cannot be- fully accepted by their host country; that see the ancestral land as a place of eventual return, when the time is right; they are

committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland and of which the group's consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland. (4)

Forced migration and displacement are two significant issues closely connected to trauma, memory of lost past, homelessness, loss of social and cultural identity at both personal and community level. The life experiences during displacement and trauma can have multiple implications like the formation of cultural consciousness, emergence of transgenerational trauma and historical memory, the creation of imaginary communities etc. that ultimately lead to the "return of the repressed" (Caruth 183). Trauma studies help in exploring different symptoms of personal and collective trauma along with its cultural poetics related to suffering, silence, self-denial, neurosis and hysteria. The most significant element in trauma theory is memory which functions to recollect and reconstruct the traumatic past both at personal and collective levels. However, the process of recreating past from memory is always incomplete. It is like a broken lens reflecting multiple fragmentary images.

Displacement becomes exile when the displaced community is unable to return to their homeland forever due to legal and social circumstances. It is ultimately a lifelong loss of social and cultural identity. As Edward Said rightly

points out: "Exile is strangely compelling to think but terrible to experience" (173).

In ancient Roman law, exile is considered as an alternative to capital punishment and Roman Senate declared exile as a serious punishment to both individuals and families. In Greek Tragedy, it has been depicted as a fate worse than death. Even in classical dramas like *Medea* by Euripides, the motif of exile has been explored in detail. It was the great Roman poet Ovid who got exiled in the city of Tomis where he wrote his exile narrative *Tristia*. In Germany after 1933, many Jews including writers and intellectuals went into exile including Anna Seghers and Klaus Mann during the dark era of National Socialism. Moreover, German exile narratives are world renowned through describing exile in its multiple dimensions. In recent years, significant exile writers include Derek Walcott, V.S. Naipaul, Edwidge Danticat etc.

For the exiled, memory is an effective tool to recover their long-lost past. It was Sigmund Freud who originally perceived memory as an unconscious formation and the psychoanalytic understanding of displacement is quintessential in identifying the ways in which the victimized subjects deal with such tragic experiences. The act of translating traumatic events into testimonial writings is crucial in coping with such tragic experiences of life. Their responsibility to remember and recall the traumatic events of life associated with displacement is central to their narratives. It is their deliberate attempt to escape from the dangers of forgetting their own social

and cultural identity. Memory can transcend both temporal and spatial boundaries of social and cultural identity. All forms of memory- the individual memory, cultural memory or transgenerational memory – depends on re-enactments and re-articulations. Formed by the responsibilities of bearing testimony as well as by the normalizing forces of amnesia and forgetting and all forms of political interests, memory is a performative process, a process of linking rather than a secure space of identity.

In Western as well as in Indian Classical literature, there are representations of trauma and PTSD like symptoms among characters who have faced sequence of tragic events in their life. In the modern era, the post-independence literature had successfully encapsulated the trauma of partition and the memories of religious riots that followed it. For instance, the stories of Amrita Pritam, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Nanak Singh, and Krishna Chander were dealing with the theme of partition and the traumatic memories associated with it. Moreover, the novels like Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, K.A. Abbas's *Inquilab*, Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* are the other examples where the trauma of partition has been a major theme. *Our Moon Has Blood Clots: A Memoir of a Lost Home in Kashmir* (2013) by Rahul Pandita, *The Garden of Solitude* (2011) by Siddhartha Gigoo, *The Odyssey of Kashmiri Pandits: Destination-Homeland-Panun Kashmir* (2018) by Dr. M. L. Bhat, *A Long Dream of Home: The Persecution, Exodus and Exile of Kashmiri Pandits* (2015) edited by

Siddhartha Gigoo and Varad Sharma are the recent examples of testimonial narratives that encapsulate the trauma of forced displacement and exile. As Meenakshi Mukherjee explains, the major concern of the twentieth century Indian novelists was the destiny of the nation and its changing national scene (34).

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