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# **Representations of Trauma in Contemporary Fiction: Karan Mahajan, Alice Sebold, and Toni Morrison**

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## Summary

### 1. Aims and Objectives of the Dissertation

The current dissertation conducted an analysis of representations of trauma in three contemporary novels examining the impact of the trauma of terror, rape, and racism on characters, both on an individual and a collective level. The three novels displayed a similar pattern where the traumatized characters suffered the consequences of their trauma and endeavored to come to terms and cope with their traumatic memories. In line with this, I checked to what extent Freud's psychoanalytic concepts of "defense mechanisms" and "the return of the repressed" and Caruth's "belatedness" of the traumatic experiences, apply to the examination of the protagonists' "working through and acting out" in La Capra's view. These concepts and views formed the basis of this dissertation when examining Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs* (TAoSBs), Sebold's *Lucky*, and Morrison's *Sula*. I examined how the traumatized characters in the texts studied in this dissertation sought, whether consciously or unconsciously, to devise 'coping with' strategies to 'work through' or 'act out' their traumatic memories and consequently how these practices affected not only the traumatized characters but even those around them.

The dissertation engaged with some prevailing and frequently asked questions in the field of trauma studies such as is there a possible way to recover from trauma, and whether or to what extent age, gender, and race are key factors affecting the traumatized characters. Can the world of fiction provide the readers with information about trauma that can help them to cope with one's own experiences? To what extent can literary trauma theory and the work of trauma therapists from the medical profession contribute to a framework to be taken into account when acknowledging the power of trauma fiction? Are traumatic experiences society building and/or society destroying, identity creating and/or identity destructing, therapeutically recoverable and/or self-recoverable?

In Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* 1996, Caruth defined trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). Previously, in her *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* she had claimed that the traumatic event "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth, 1995:4). Taking Caruth's definition of trauma and the victim's reaction to the traumatic event, together with some

other psychologists', such as Judith Herman and Karen Duncan , and sociologists', such as Kai Erikson and Jeffrey Alexander, definitions of trauma, as a starting point, I examined how the language of the texts created the impact of trauma on some characters, both on the personal and collective levels, in the three selected novels, taking into consideration the social, political, and cultural dimensions that shaped the traumatic experience. This means that besides studying the traumatized mind, a particular attention should be paid to study other constructs that are the causes of the trauma experiences.

The present dissertation moreover illuminated the need felt by many contemporary writers for steering what they found to be a Euro-American centrism of reading trauma, thus failing to deal efficiently with or ignoring cross-cultural engagements. Therefore, this dissertation showed a more contemporary trend in the study of trauma which demands a priority to study the marginalized traumatic experiences of non-Western and minority groups, and calls for a shift to include the study of the perpetrators rather than prioritizing the study of trauma victims only.

## **2. The Dissertation Layout**

The current dissertation falls into five chapters with an introduction and conclusions. Chapter 1 and 2 constituted the theoretical part of the dissertation. Chapter 1 introduced various definitions of trauma starting with defining trauma as a clinical concept, moving through theorizing it, up to its representation in contemporary literary studies. The chapter also outlined the different stages of the evolution of trauma theory shedding light on the most prominent kinds of trauma with its various definitions. It further mapped the development of the concept of contemporary trauma beginning with shell shock, combat fatigue, to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Addressing identity transformation of the traumatized persons, I highlighted the relationship between trauma and identity and introduced some definitions and views of notable figures in the field of trauma studies that show the impact of trauma on identity. These definitions and views were taken as starting points to reflect the effect of trauma on the identities of some characters in the selected novels. By reviewing some previous studies related to the field, I displayed, in this chapter, the power of trauma narrative in literature arguing that if literature remains silent about the traumatic events the world is witnessing, the perpetrators win. Therefore, trauma narratives should bear witness to the historical traumatic experiences of people.

Chapter 2 introduced the psychoanalytic approach showing its impact and relevance to the study of trauma in literary texts. Starting with defining psychoanalysis as a therapeutic technique,

the chapter showed how psychoanalytic criticism derived from it to study literary texts. In this chapter, I demonstrated the significance of the psychoanalytic criticism in trauma studies showing how some literary critics, like Cathy Caruth, were inspired by Freud's psychoanalytic theory to develop the concept of trauma in literature. In this chapter I displayed how Freud's contemporaries and later theorists had enriched the psychoanalytic theory by debating, expanding, and revising some of the concepts of Freud's psychoanalysis. For example, I introduced Alfred Adler's 'inferiority complex' and Erik Erikson's 'identity crisis.' These concepts were taken into account when examining the novels to show how the feeling of inferiority might lead to trauma and how some characters' identities were affected positively/negatively in the aftermath of a traumatic event. Moreover, following Lacan's view that sees the unconscious part of the human mind as language in that it can be systematically analyzed, I introduced the Leech and Short model of thought presentation arguing that this model is a very useful tool to stylistically analyze the mental dispositions of the traumatized characters.

In chapter 3, I examined the effect of individual and cultural trauma on some characters in Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs* displaying the reactions and perceptions of what a 'small bomb' that takes place in a remote and less known place in the world would mean as compared to a 'big bomb' of the events of September 11 that took place in the United States. Besides examining the traumatized minds of the victims, I explored the mind-set of the perpetrators which had been given a special illustration in this novel, a trend that conforms to the contemporariness of trauma studies. Other social, religious, and political constructs were also shown to be important causes of trauma in this novel.

On an individual level, I examined the impact of trauma on Vikas and Deepa who lost their only two kids in the Delhi blast and Mansoor, the kids' friend who survived but left with indelible psychological trauma. All the three mentioned characters showed varied (PTSD) symptoms and were eventually not able to cope with their traumas. Following the death of his kids, Vikas went through an overwhelming psychological trauma partly due to his feeling of guilt because he sent his kids to the market where the explosion went off. Both Vikas and Deepa were shown to be inflicting self-harm. Vikas's suffering continued not only mentally but also physically through punishing himself by eating little, giving up work, walking in the streets most of the time aimlessly, and addicting to tea, coffee, and caffeine. All these practices affected his health until he was found dead of semi-starvation alone in his rented flat after his separation from his wife. The shocking

death of the two kids reduced Deepa to silence. To escape her psychological trauma, Deepa too inflicted self-harm by standing long hours before the stove to absorb its heat. Eventually, this trauma caused family fragmentation. Vikas's neglect of himself and his wife led Deepa to seek love and care in another person the result of which was to separate from her husband.

The bomb had an apparent negative impact on Mansoor's personality both as a child and as a grownup. Mansoor grew up with his physical and psychological trauma, his transformations were linked to unexpected events and encounters, everything happening in the shadow of the bomb that was to affect his whole life ever after. As a child Mansoor's life was characterized by alienation and attachment behavior towards his parents. For instance, Mansoor developed a fear of going out home alone. Rather than going to school by the school bus, he went accompanied by his parents. Furthermore, he had been spending much more time in his home. This life of estrangement and disintegration in society had a greater impact on Mansoor in his adulthood. The traumatic event and its aftermath amounted to an experience which greatly changed his worldview about his culture and his own religion. Remarkably, Mansoor transformed from a child victim of the 1996 blast to a suspect of terrorism spending time in prison before he was finally released, a broken man, this last experience being even more traumatic than the explosion itself and its immediate aftermath. The trauma of his childhood appeared to have had a smaller impact on his identity transformation than the associations that he developed later on.

Examining the mind-set of the perpetrators such as Shockie and Ayub revealed that these two characters are ordinary persons but whose mind was corrupted by political and some extremist religious beliefs. They both are traumatized; Shockie was personified as a political activist in pursuit of independence for Kashmir, and Ayub felt himself estranged, detached, and marginalized in his own country. Both the Kashmiri case and the Gujarati riots had been introduced in the novel as primary causes of the traumatization of these two characters.

The analysis of this chapter revealed that all defense mechanisms the characters used, whether consciously or unconsciously, to protect themselves against the effect of the trauma did not work. They were unable to cope with the trauma they had experienced.

In chapter 4, I investigated the impact of rape trauma on identity and the power of storytelling in the process of recovery from trauma in Sebold's *Lucky: A Memoir*. I examined how Alice's story was narrativized, dealing with the consistent endeavor with which the protagonist struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after the brutal rape she had suffered. The

text appeared to demonstrate the power of narration as a very important coping mechanism to overcome these disorders. *Lucky* stands as a good example of self-therapy from the trauma of rape. All through the novel, though facing difficulties, Alice struggled to gain self-recovery and to be an independent individual regardless of the boundaries of the society that victimized her. The mechanisms Alice used to shield herself against the traumatic memories after her experience of rape had proved useful to make her recover and reengage in society.

In this chapter, I dealt with Sebold's memoir as a form of narrative that belongs to testimony as a distinct genre in which Alice Sebold bears witness to her rape, an experience that Sebold had lived through. I moreover showed how the reading of Sebold's memoir involves a relationship between the reader and the writer. This relationship is governed by Sebold's use of a fragmented narrative voice which requires a commitment from the readers to collect the bits and pieces of information into a collective whole. Actually this is not a deliberate use of style, rather, this is because of the effect of the traumatic experience itself which, causes a fragmented memory in the mind of the traumatized survivor.

Examining Sebold's *Lucky* from the perspectives offered by Dominic La Capra and by Kostova, it had been observed that storytelling may be seen as one of the coping mechanisms at the level of personal healing. Therefore, besides instructing and entertaining, literature helps to heal trauma. Sebold's narrative of her story of rape served as an important therapeutic role to share her own traumatic experience with others in the sense that trauma narratives help readers to access traumatic experiences. Telling her story of rape did not only encourage other characters in the novel to speak freely about their trauma of rape as her mother's friend and her college friend, but it can also help readers. Unlike the other two novels, Sebold's *Lucky* displayed that Alice's character, after her experience of rape and abuse, had developed significantly. The trauma of the past had a positive effect on her own identity. She began the novel as a weak and naïve girl and came out a strong typical example of a solid contemporary woman. Alice developed a new perception of her rape trauma that enabled her to establish a form of personal healing. She managed to use narrative as a means to work-through her trauma. Her strife with the trauma of rape enabled her to gain self-confidence and respect. Telling the story of rape experience could be a step forward towards developing identity and self- concept about oneself that had been greatly affected by sexual abuse. By returning to trauma, Alice Sebold was able to overcome her fear of facing painful memories and became able to reengage in life that is satisfying and rewarding.

It had been also found in this chapter that the lack of family and social support, which are necessary to foster healing from trauma, hindered the process of recovery in Alice's case. One of the most important ways to quickly convalesce from the trauma of rape and its outcomes is to reestablish a social support and avoid isolation. In *Lucky*, being traumatized, Alice did not have a support neither in the house nor in the society. Therefore, it might be entirely possible that her recovery process from the trauma of rape had taken so long because she did not receive the good family support she needed most of all. Society also victimized Alice which, instead of placing blame on her perpetrator, blamed and shamed her as if she were a victimizer not a rape survivor. All these factors made Alice feel isolated. Her endeavors to befriend schoolmates failed because they think that approaching her will cause troubles to them.

In chapter 5, I explored the effect of trauma on minorities in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, arguing that racism creates disharmony and inferiority complex that lead to trauma. In this chapter, I examined the impact of war trauma on two soldiers, Shadrack and Plum, who participated in World War I. Due to the effect of war, both Shadrack and Plum showed personality transformation. They went to war normal and came back emotionally distraught because of the horrible scenes of death they witnessed. Upon their return from the war, the two veterans showed (PTSD) symptoms; in the hospital Shadrack began to hallucinate and imagine seeing things, and Plum showed a child-like behavior. I examined how discrimination, lack of social support besides the traumatic memories pushed both Shadrack and Plum to the consumption of alcohol and drugs to relieve feelings of anxiety and distress. To escape the traumatic memories of war and the reality of their present life, both Shadrack and Plum resorted to Alcohol and drugs. The effects of these harmful habits caused Shadrack to lose his sanity and Plum to retreat to childhood behavior and consequently to his death by the hands of his mother who did not understand that her son suffers from war trauma. Through Shadrack and Plum, Morrison introduced how psychologically broken soldiers were received by a racially prejudiced society and ignorant community.

I further examined the childhood-womanhood trauma through two girls, Sula and Nel. It had been revealed in this chapter that Sula had some traumatic experiences when she was a child such as when overhearing her mother say that she did not like her and also when she knew that her grandmother Eva set Plum on fire. Nel too was shown to have a childhood trauma when she witnessed her mother humiliated by a white conductor. In addition, the two girls shared the trauma of the accidental death of Chicken Little which was caused by Sula. These childhood traumatic



experiences had their effects on the two girls as grownup. Sula revealed later on that she was happy to see her mother ablaze hoping that she keeps on dancing and, to punish her grandmother, she sent her to live in a nursing home. On the other hand, unlike her mother, Nel decided to find out her me-ness. Ultimately, the analysis revealed that both Sula and Nel could not escape or reconcile their childhood traumas with their present life. In coping with or trying to escape their traumatic memories, the two girls behaved differently. Following the marriage of Nel and Jude, Sula left the town. To build her self-identity, Sula left the community for a ten-year journey of study outside the Bottom while Nel preferred to adapt herself to the conventions of the Bottom community and thus married a man whom she did not choose, a decision Nel later regretted. With this conventional marriage, Nel seemed to abandon her childhood promise that one day she will travel to discover the world.

In this chapter, I also examined how Freud's 'the return of the repressed' and Caruth's 'belatedness' of the traumatic experience led to what has come to be known as transgenerational trauma where the Bottom community created a special form of collective memory and shared sense of identity. In this respect, it had been revealed that transgenerational trauma was also part of Morrison's fiction in which she showed that part of the suffering of the African Americans was primarily caused by the transmission of the trauma from one generation to another.

### **3. Some Concluding Remarks**

This dissertation had indicated that traumatic experiences were society destroying, identity creating and destructing, and self-recoverable. The analysis had revealed that none of the traumatic experiences in the selected novels were society building or therapeutically recoverable. For instance, in the *Association of Small Bombs*, the society in India was threatened by the recurring disturbances and turbulences between the Muslims and the Hindus. In light of the repeated internal conflicts between the Muslims and the Hindus in India, the society solidarity was always shaken. Therefore, cultural trauma can be located within the context of violence and terrorism. Thus, by introducing Kashmir and the Gujarati riots into this novel, Mahajan conveyed that cultural trauma was the outcome of sociocultural processes and sociopolitical events. In Morrison's *Sula*, it had been discovered that the traumatic experiences had affected the characters' identities. Morrison's *Sula* revealed that collective identity does not necessarily involve harmony in society, crises and traumatic experience involving not only out-group victimizers and in-group victims. The Bottom's residents were treated differently by the Whites based on color, race, culture and language, but

traumatic experiences were also part and parcel of in-group interaction, even between and among as good friends as Nel and Sula, as one of the most telling illustrations. Both fictional characters and real people display a variety of features, including innumerable shades of grey, rather than black and white features. Learning how to cope with trauma rather than lamenting one's plight was what some of Morrison's characters were up to. In *Lucky*, Alice had been found to recover from her trauma of rape without resorting to therapeutic treatment. She managed to find a balance between her traumatic memories of rape and her future life. Throughout this memoir, readers may feel clearly Alice's struggle to cope with the aftermath of the rape and indeed, she was successful to distinguish herself as an independent character able to integrate into society again. Remarkably, the novel displayed that the techniques Alice followed to self-recover from her trauma of rape without recourse to therapeutic treatment was fruitful.

The analysis of the selected novels had also revealed that trauma is not limited to a specific age, gender, color, or a particular culture. It had been displayed that trauma is a universal phenomenon that could happen to any person regardless of age, gender, and race. All persons are prone to the danger of trauma and its impact is not limited to the victims only, but may extend to the persons around them. Evidently, Mansoor, Sula, and Nel all suffered childhood trauma. Trauma during adulthood was represented in the characters of Vikas, Deepa, and Alice. Morrison's characters had been shown as a telling example of trauma of racism. In Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs*, cultural trauma was addressed through the lens of the recurrent violence between the Muslims and the Hindus.

The present dissertation while employing contemporary theories, complementary to and sometimes making departure from Freud's, is meant to start from a better understanding of the workings of trauma and to broaden the interpretative framework for the examination of representations of traumatic experience in literature, particularly in contemporary fiction. It is worth noting that Freud's psychoanalysis dealt with cases of hysteria and then moved to deal with psychologically veterans after World War I, while not addressing, for example, trauma of rape. Therefore, the diversity of contemporary theories of trauma helped not only how to understand the concept of trauma as a devastating experience that affects a person's memory but also to take into account other social, political, sociological, and historical constructs and the way trauma writers introduce them in a coherent narrative.

By engaging with trauma as one of the most intricate and psychologically disturbing issues for individuals and societies in contemporary time, the current doctoral dissertation had responded to several questions about the (im)possibility of representing trauma in literature and whether healing is possible or not. It requires a profound understanding and awareness of the concept of trauma on the part of the authors, while taking into consideration the ability of the readers to understand trauma from a medical and literary perspective. Even though the novels by Mahajan and Morrison did not show an apparent recovery or coping with, working through/acting out in La Capra's technical terms, trauma in the sense that some characters died of grief and despair while others lived with scars that never healed, these narratives can still be seen as symptomatic of a persistent need to survive and never give up hope.

The traumatized characters in the investigated novels failed to establish new connections required for healing. For example, in *The Association of Small Bombs*, Deepa's wrong choice to make love with Mukesh did not solve her problems. Rather, this affair added in more complications to her relationship with her husband resulting in more alienation and then separation. In addition, the psychological trauma Mansoor suffered, following the blast, caused him to be kept in house for a long period. This estrangement was a primary cause for his wrong choice of friends later on. In *Lucky*, Alice's endeavors to build new relations following her rape failed because the society looked at her as a raped girl not a rape victim or survivor. In *Sula*, Morrison's traumatized characters were estranged because of the prejudice of the society in which they lived and mostly because of their own community that segregated them based on ignorance such as the case of Shadrack and Plum and gender such as Sula and Nel.

Finally, the authors selected in this dissertation utilized stylistic devices that mimicked the symptoms of the traumatic experiences. These stylistic devices, whether used consciously or unconsciously, have their counterparts in the nature of trauma. Both Mahajan and Morrison used repetition and intertextuality that mimicked the repetitive phenomenon and the reference to or the haunting of the past, and Sebold's use of the fragmented narrative voice mimicked the fragmentary nature of the traumatic memory. These stylistic innovations create a more vivid interaction between the writer and the reader. They help the writer convey the artistic message of the text with more urgency, turning the interaction between author and reader into a memorable existential experience.

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