

Conference Paper

A New Beginning of Trauma Theory in Literature

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Abstract

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* sparked a great attention to literature lovers. Her suggestion on Trauma Theory enlightens a new era in poststructural approach of analyzing literary texts. Slowly but gradually, several models were introduced which inherent neurobiological features of trauma that refuse representation and cause dissociation were significant to arguments that sought to emphasize the extent of profound suffering from an external source, whether that source is an individual perpetrator or collective social practice. It was quickly accompanied by alternative models and methodologies that revised this foundational claim to suggest determinate value exists in traumatic experience. However, the researcher would like to explore and reintroduce Trauma Theory in more contemporary approach so that it will be acceptable and practical in all genres of literature. Similarly, this study is in line with the critics such as Leys and Cvetkovich who establish a psychological framework apart from the classic model thus produce different conclusions regarding trauma's influence upon language, perception, and society. The researcher believes that Trauma Theory should be viewed in a larger conceptual framework rather than the social psychology theories in addition to neurobiological theories; that is in the view of Critical Thinking. This stance might therefore consider dubious the assertion of trauma's intrinsic dissociation. The discussion focuses more on the roles of Critical Thinking in supporting Trauma Theory in several selected poems. In conclusion, the findings might prove that Critical Thinking and Trauma Theory can be blended together in developing learners' intellectuality and maturity in analyzing and appreciating literary texts.

Keywords: Trauma Theory, Critical Thinking, Literature, Poetry.

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1. Introduction

Baker (2012) points that literary theory refers to a particular form of literary criticism in which particular academic, scientific, or philosophical approaches are followed in a systematic fashion while analyzing literary texts. However, traditional literary criticism tends not to focus on a particular aspect of a literary text in quite the same manner that literary theory usually does. Literary theory proposes particular, systematic approaches to literary texts that impose a particular line of intellectual reasoning to it, therefore, literary theorists often adapt systems of knowledge developed largely outside the realm of literary studies and impose them upon literary texts for the purpose of discovering or developing new and unique understandings of those texts that a traditional literary critic might not be intellectually equipped to recognize [3]. Today, some literary scholars debate the ultimate value of literary theory as a method of interpretation and it is nevertheless vital for students of literature to understand the core principles of literary theory and be able to use those same principles to interpret literary texts.

The researcher believes that the study of literary theory is challenging, especially for students who are relatively new to the field. It takes time, patience, and practice for students to get used to the unique and sometimes highly specialized language that literary theorists tend to use in their writings as well as the often complicated and detailed arguments they make. As we are exposed to literary theory, take the time to carefully consider the argument being made, to re-read when we find ourselves confused by a statement, and to look up and acquaint ourselves with any language or terminology we are exposed to and not familiar with [1].

2. What is Trauma Theory?

The field of trauma studies in literary criticism gained significant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. A theoretical trend was introduced by scholars like Caruth, who pioneered a psychoanalytic post structural approach that suggests trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language. This Lacanian approach crafts a concept of trauma as a recurring sense of absence that sunders knowledge of the extreme experience, thus preventing linguistic value other than a referential expression. The evolution of trauma theory in literary criticism might best

be understood in terms of the changing psychological definitions of trauma as well as the semiotic, rhetorical, and social concerns that are part of the study of trauma in literature and society [6].

3. Trauma in Poetry

Many studies that focus on trauma in literature focus a great deal on repetitions that exist within the literary work because repetition is a common response to trauma and easily identifiable in text. Many survivors of trauma repeat aspects or the entirety of the event that was traumatic in their life in their mind and, sometimes, in their literature [10]. Literary trauma theorists make note of these elements of repetition in a literary work and discuss the correlation therein. Nandi (2016) makes note how literary trauma theory takes into account “what cannot be fully re-membered, the illegible, the unspeakable, with a something-repeated, be it an image, a phrase, a metaphor, even a syllable or sound”. The present study does not wish to discount repetition or any of the other aspects that literary trauma theory examines in literature. Instead, my study looks to expand beyond these facets and examine traumatic memory and the role of emotion, most specifically in poetry. The use of traumatic figurative language that is apparent in many poems which discuss or display elements of trauma. Traumatic figurative language provides an individual with a way to discuss trauma by using a metaphor, simile, or metonym when discussing it [4].

4. Critical Thinking in Poetry

As highlighted by Facione (2011), ‘Critical thinking is a purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based’, hence, this study tries to connect the relationship of Trauma Theory and Critical Thinking, for the first time. The researcher borrows the Nadal’s idea (2016) and Osman’s (2013) who say that only those who have high order thinking skills would be able to understand and synthesize traumatic elements in literature. The researcher has analyzed more than 40 special poems in discussing this theory pertaining to various types of poetry, but for this paper only three poems were chosen to be shared with.

5. Analysis

5.1. August 6th by Sankichi Toge

Traumatic event in this poem is represented through the repetition of the phrase '*how could I ever forget*' where it has been repeated by the poet for three times. In traumatic figurative language, repetition is one of the common elements of trauma [2]. This repetition acted as the reminder to the readers. As for this poem, the poet reminds the readers how the scenery of the incident looks like. Other than that, those repetitions of words also show that the tragedy is still fresh in his head and those bad memories will never fade from his mind. Here we can say that, this atomic bomb tragedy was really affected his emotion and life. In this poem, it is not just the poet who can feel the trauma. The whole society of Hiroshima was felt the same too. This can be spotted through the phrase '*all crying*' and '*how can I forget the entreaties of the departed wife and child*'. As this tragedy was not just involving the poet but also the whole people in the Hiroshima, all of them were facing the trauma too as the tragedy has destroyed their houses and also killed their family members. The poet told the readers that all of them were crying after they have seen bodies on the parade ground which were scattered like jumbled stone image. Other than that, many people were departed from their children and wife resulted from the tragedy. Through this, it is proven that the society of Hiroshima also felt the same trauma just like the poet faced.

The poet also tried to share the feeling of trauma that he faced during the event with the readers. In creating this feeling, he used some elements of Bloom's Taxonomy. The stage that involved in creating this poem is *Remembering*. This is because, all the lines that contained in this poem were related to him, where he recalled his experience and interpreting them by using the medium of writing. The poet was able to interpret the victims' condition during that day. The way he interpreted those things could affect the emotion of those who read this poem. Other than that, the stage of *Evaluating* is also involved here where the poet criticizing the act of bombing done by America which has killed thousands of Japanese people. Through those *Criticizing*, the poet was actually tried to ask the readers to evaluate by themselves what would happen if this tragedy occurs in their countries. Other than that, the traumatic figurative language used in his writing could trigger the readers' thinking to analyze what would have happened if they were in the poet's shoes. The poet also presented the traumatic elements through the use of traumatic figurative language such as '*half skin peeled off, bald*', '*pot-bellied*', '*skin dangling like rags*', '*building split, bridges collapsed*' and many

more. All those words actually explain how the people were suffered from the tragedy and it remains till now.

5.2. Home Burial by Robert Frost

The poem 'Home Burial' is closely associated with Frost's life which he had lost his children. Those events have left great impact to the poet and have affected them emotionally such as depression and frustration. The poem describes two tragedies which are: the death of their son and the death of their marriage. Both of them have different ways of dealing with grief and it jeopardizes their marriage. Element of trauma, sorrow and frustration can be found throughout the poem. The husband has been looking at his wife who is witting down looking out the window, overlook the graveyard. Her hesitation stops Amy from going down and she decided to stay in her place. It shows that she is not ready to move on and face the reality where she chooses to stay in his grief while reminiscing her memory with her dead son. She is still in trauma after his death. Traumatic element can be seen in the line when Amy refuses any help from her husband who attempts to ease her mind by asking her to share what she feels. Amy, who still in grieving period, decided to ignore him by keeping silent. This stanza shows the husband who is ready to accept the reality. He expresses his sadness and frustration in line '*The little graveyard where my people are!*' Which means the graveyard is belong to his newly born son. However, he realizes that he already gone in line *But I understand: it is not the stones, But the child's mound*'.

Then, Amy cried to stop her husband from talking about their son's death. It shows that she is not ready to face the reality and accept what has already happened. The husband expresses his anger by asking '*Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?*' However, Amy still refuses to talk to him and decided to walk away. It shows failure in communication between them due to the traumatic event that happened. Again, Amy's refusal to listen to her husband illustrates that she doesn't want to accept the reality. Amy's husband begs her to stay because he wants his wife to talk to him instead of her friends. This entire stanza expresses the husband's frustration about his wife's attitude of telling others about her problem instead of her own husband. '*I'm not so much, Unlike other folks as your standing there*', by saying this, he goes humble by comparing himself with Amy's friends. Despite his anger and frustration, he still doesn't give up on begging his wife to stay but Amy seems to ignore him. 'Home Burial' illustrates that a traumatic occurrence such as death can destroy everything

including marriage. Failure to manage sadness, frustration and anger led by any traumatic tragedy can destruct a harmonious relationship like what happens to Amy and her husband.

The researcher analyses that to relate this poem with critical thinking [5] which is very suitable to be related with *Three Functions of Mind which are thinking, wanting and feeling*. Thinking refers to the process of creating meaning via events that occurred in our life. It continuously telling us about: This is happening in our life. This is what going on. It helps us to make sense of any events that happened. Wanting requires effort or energy to change something. For example, we are persuading others to agree with our opinion. Feeling involves creating the positive or negative meaning from the events occurred such as sad, happy, disappointing, worried and excited. In this poem, Amy and her husband have been facing a painful event which is the death of their son. An issue emerges when they have different way of dealing with the event. Amy seems to be failed in making sense of what has happened. They have different way of perceiving and judging the events which put them in conflict. However, in helping his wife to realize what had happened, the husband tries to clarify and synthesize the event by asking his wife to talk, but he failed. At the end, despite her husband's warning to bring her back by force, she still decided to go out to her friends and share her feelings. She thinks that it is the best for her to come out with such decision. In short, the poem comprises all the three functions of mind.

5.3. Still I rise by Maya Angelou

This stirring poem is packed full of figurative language and when read through comes over as a remotely secular hymn to the oppressed and abused. The trauma experienced here is the discrimination received from the public. The message is loud and clear though no matter the cruelty, regardless of method and circumstance, the victim will elevate up, the slave will surmount adversity.

Starting from the first stanza, Maya Angelou gives her heart and soul to declare that nothing and no one could oppress her or keep her down. She faces trauma when encountering the history books that consist plenty of '*twisted lies*', but she does not care. She will not let it bother her that others '*trod her in the very dirt*'. She proclaims that if she is trodden in the dirt, that she will rise like dust. The dust rising, for me, distributes the image of a ghost – perhaps even the ghosts of slaves – that no oppressor or murderer can elude. Obviously, she faces the trauma of being judged by others, and she asks a question. This is a fascinating question, as she refers to her own tone as

'*sassiness*' and asks the hearer if her sassy tone is upsetting. She sees that the people around her in her society are '*beset with gloom*' when she prospers. She questions this. She is aware that she has prospered in life, in her writing, and as a woman. The '*oil wells pumping in [her] living room*' denote her prosperity. She also compares herself to the moon and the suns as they are affected by the tides. This gives us the understanding that the speaker has no other choice but to rise up out of her affliction. Although faced with the trauma of the society's might to keep her oppressed, it is in her nature to rise up and stand against oppression just as it is the nature of the tides to respond to the moon. The speaker's questions in this stanza are direct, pertinent, and appropriately accusing. She has to stand up to the trauma of being disliked by the racist people in her society, who are all bitter of her success. With that, she directs these questions at the society that has long tried to keep her oppressed. She asks them if they want to see her broken, oppressed, depressed and bitter. She asks these questions, knowing that this indeed is what many within society wanted. They did not want to see a black woman rise up out of the oppression of her society and succeed. The speaker is aware of this and she draws attention to it with these revealing, yet cutting questions.

In the middle of the poem, she perpetuates with the questions directed at a racist society when she asks whether her '*haughtiness*' is offensive. She is aware that society resents visually perceiving a black woman full of pride. This question has an air of sarcasm which accommodates to point out the hypocrisy of society as it is embittered by the prosperity of one that it has endeavored to oppress. The speaker overcomes her trauma sarcastic tone as she pretends to comfort the hearer. She verbally expresses, '*don't you take it awful hard*', a sarcastic way of pretending to care for those who resent her prosperity. She perpetuates, however, to '*flaunt*' her prosperity before the society that has always oppressed her. She claims that she has '*gold mines*' and that she laughs at the prosperity she has found. She tries to make the society aware that no matter what it does to oppress her, it will not prosper. She lets society know that it cannot prevail against her with words or looks. Despite the trauma of hatefulness received from society, she proclaims that society cannot prevail against her even if it managed to have her killed. She claims that she will still '*like air*' rise, thus demonstrating her willingness to overcome her trauma. The speaker perpetuates her querying of society. By this time in the poem, it becomes clear that the speaker has placed society on tribulation and is now in the process of cross-examination. She has the answers to these questions, but to ask them is to incriminate the offender. While she asks incriminating questions, she simultaneously reveals incredible aplomb despite the oppression of society. In this stanza, the speaker conclusively refers to the trauma of her past-

the reason that she is oppressed and resented to this day. She calls slavery '*history's shame*' and she proclaims that she will not be held down by the past, even if it is '*rooted in pain*'. In the final stanza, the speaker reveals that she intends to leave behind all the trauma of slavery and the history of oppression, with intent to rise above it. She claims that she will leave behind the "terror and fear" and that she will rise above the pain and the oppression '*into a daybreak that's wondrously clear*'. The speaker does not intend to sanction the hatefulness of society or the pain of the past to prevent her from becoming all that she ever dreamed of being. For this reason, she reiterates three times, '*I rise*'.

From the view of Critical Thinking, *Still I rise*, the poem makes readers *recall* trauma from the past that Maya Angelou has experienced and understand the poet overcomes abuse and social disadvantages to become a symbol of strength, courage, and resilience, The poem also sends out a message that we all can rise up from our darkest hours, which can be applied in life and ask the readers to analyze the lyrics and tone to truly understand the poem. At the same time, readers are persuaded to justify the decisions that the poet takes to overcome the traumatic experiences.

6. Conclusion

The selected poems show the example of Trauma theory in poetry which are represented in the background of war, death and oppression. These emotional traumatic incidents were directly and indirectly storied in such ways to highlight various issues of sadness, frustration and alienage. At the same time, the poems have to be viewed from the angle of Critical Thinking as well in order to go deeper inside the intention and message hidden by the poets. Once, the readers critically understand what the poets trying to convey and to identify the underlying meaning behind the entire poem by understanding figurative language used, eventually, the readers would be able to interpret the immense mental pressure that the poets trying to highlight. As for the last and highest level of critical thinking, which is creating, readers have to create their own meaning in order to understand the entire poem and appreciate the beauty of literature.

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