



ROLE OF TRAUMA IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

All human beings suffer from trauma in their life in one way or the other. Some incidents, some experiences of our life leave an indelible imprint on our psyche that determines and direct our emotional and psychological behaviour. Trauma has been dealt in literature in many ways. It has many forms. A man's behaviour is affected by the traumatic experience of his life he had or might have undergone. The psychological effect of trauma may be studied through reactions, social behaviour, thought processes, memories, introspection, retrospection, foreshadow, flashback and awful remembrances. Though the term has become a literary discourse in recent years but many writers have been using trauma in their writings as a tool to reveal the behavioural pattern of their characters. Few writers we may name such as Emily Bronte, Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, Kamala Das who have presented traumatic experience of life through their characters in their writings. This paper presents how trauma plays a significant role in literature through various means and how people suffer from different traumas in their lives.

Keywords: Trauma, Psychological Effect, Marginalization, Sexual Abuse, Riots.

One of the most recent trends in literary criticism began after the mid-1990s with Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Roger Luckhurst's in *Mixing memory and desire: psychoanalysis, psychology and Trauma Theory*, describes trauma as "something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were nowhere to put it, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in our mind like an intruder or a ghost" (Waugh 499). Trauma affects more psychologically than physically, it leads to a devastating mental state which may result into the nervous and even physical breakdown if emotional sustenance is not provided in time. Trauma may be related with the negative experience of an incident or even a single day

experience. It is associated with memory. When we suffer a traumatic experience, it is present somewhere in our psyche in the repressed form. It comes out in the form of fear, anger, depression, violent attack on someone. Some incidents may cause such an effect on our mind that it becomes buried deep in the psyche of unconsciousness. The causes of trauma are sexual abuse, failure in love, brutality, war, genocide, riots, domestic violence, social discrimination, transgender discrimination, emotional break-up, war, treachery, betrayal, atrocity and so on. Therefore, trauma is related with us in various forms like psychological, sociological, political, and historical and ultimately it has become a part of literature. There have been many writers who have presented traumatic experience in their creative writings like Mulk Raj

Anand, Arundhati Roy, Emily Bronte, Margaret Atwood, Kamala Das, etc.

Memory plays a very significant role in trauma. Roger Luckhurst in the critical article *Mixing memory and desire: psychoanalysis, and trauma theory* puts:

“Memories from childhood could carry a certain objectivity, buried away and awaiting discovery by the analyst. They would provide a causative account of mental development: early experience produce effects on later ones. But memories relating to childhood would mean that all memories could be subject to retrospective transformation, and could only ever provide an interpretative account of childhood, one open to endless reinterpretation.”(Vaugh 501)

Childhood memories always haunt throughout life if there is something wrong done in the childhood. It may be the case of Sexual abuse of children. Arundhati Roy in her *The God of Small Things* presents the incident of sexual abuse of Estha in the novel by the Orangedrink Lemondrink man at Abhilash Talkies. He sexually abuses the child Estha by making him help in masturbating. Estha could not recover from the traumatic experience and retired to his own shell losing all contact with the outside world. The incident at Abhilash Talkies, for instance, had such a damaging influence upon the seven year old Estha that it haunted him throughout his life reminding us of Master Philip in Graham Greene’s memorable story *The Basement Room*. No less traumatic is the two children’s (Estha and his sister Rahel) experience of their betrayal of Velutha wherein they were forced to lie in police station against Velutha, the untouchable. Ultimately the two children’s lie caused the death of Velutha at the hands of the merciless and brutal police.

Social discrimination like untouchability is still prevalent in our society and it is very difficult to bear the pain and suffering of such a social discrimination which forces us to think over where this society stands today. Mulk Raj Anand in his famous novel, *Untouchable*, has presented the experience of a single day in the life of Bakha, the

untouchable, who is an eighteen year son of old Lakha, the Jemadar of the sweeper of the town and cantonment. Although fascinated by western dress (as we see in his securing a pair of old breeches from an English soldier and a pair of old boots from a sepoy), he is damned to live in outcastes’ colony and his job is to clean three rows of latrines several times single-handedly in spite of stirrings deep inside his soul. “They think we are mere dirt because we clean their dirt” (Untouchable 89). During the course of his usual toil, Bakha happens to touch a caste Hindu and he is slapped for it by the latter and subjected to the most inhuman treatment before a crowd. He is called ‘Dirty dog! Son of a bitch! Offspring of pig!’ That makes him aware of his place in the society traumatically. Rightly observes C. J. George in this context:

“Bakha recognizes with shock his social position. It illuminates the inner walls of his mind. He realises that though he possesses like any human being, head and heart, and flesh and blood, he is in the eyes of the world as untouchable.” (George 34).

Immediately after the slap scene, he observes an old Hindu touching a bull and reflects critically on it. Then Bakha learns how the priest, Kalinath had attempted to molest his sister Sohini. That enrages him but his clenched fists soon relax and fall loosely by his side. In this way, we see the traumatic experience of one day life of the untouchable Bakha through which he would have suffered every day.

Arundhati Roy has presented Velutha, the Paravan, the untouchable in her *The God of Small Things* who is a modern version of Bakha. Even the modern version, Velutha, could not evade the curse of untouchability and he has to pay for his transgression of social taboos with his life. He had committed a sin by making love to a woman of upper strata of society. All the social forces stood against him and Velutha was killed at the hands of police mercilessly. Velutha did not advance himself in the affairs with Ammu but it was she that advanced to him for having a relationship with him. When his affair is disclosed and he is to be punished for what he has done, even Police plays

its foul role under the feeling of casteism and takes law in his own hand to deliver the judgement on the spot. He is killed with severe brutality and nothing worse than it could be:

“His skull was fractured in three places. His nose and both his cheekbones smashed, leaving his face pulpy, undefined. The blow to his mouth had split open his upper lip and broken six teeth, three of which were embedded in his lower lips, hideously inverting his beautiful smile. Four of his ribs were splintered, one has pierced his left lung, which was what made him bleed from his mouth. The blood on his breath bright red. Fresh. Frothy. His lower intestine was ruptured and haemorrhaged, the blood collected in his abdominal cavity. His spine was damaged in two places, the concussion has paralysed his right arm and resulted in a loss of control over his bladder and rectum. Both his knee caps were shattered.” (GOD 310)

This was the final blow to his life. He could not get the due status in the society which is caste-ridden in spite of having all the humane qualities only because he belonged to the outcastes' community.

Riots and genocide leave an indelible print on us. The trauma that humanity suffers from is handed down from generation to generation. Arundhati Roy in her most awaited second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, has presented the pictures of so many Riots, massacres and tragedy that India has witnessed in the past like Kashmir valley massacre, Bhagalpur riots, the Sikh Riot of Delhi in 1984, and the tragedy of Bhopal Gas. All these incidents have left a huge traumatic effect on the masses of India. Describing how the Kashmiri Pandits have to leave the valley, Roy writes:

“The ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ they referred to was the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir valley when the freedom struggle had turned militant in the 1990s and some Muslim militants had turned on the tiny Hindu population. Several

hundred Hindus had been massacred in macabre ways and when the government announced that it could not ensure their safety, almost the entire population of Kashmiri Hindus, almost two hundred thousand people, had fled the Valley and moved into refugee camps in the plains of Jammu where many of them still lived” (MINISTRY 116).

Roy further describing the 1984 Sikh Riot in Delhi, which was an aftermath of the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, writes that—

“For few days after the assassination, mobs led by her supporters and acolytes killed thousands of Sikhs in Delhi. Homes, shops, taxi stands with Sikh drivers, whole localities where Sikhs lived were burned to the ground. Plumes of black smoke climbed into the sky from the fires all over the city” (MINISTRY 150).

Our society, still in this age of modern era, adopts the norms of double standard for men and women. Women are always marginalised in our society due to the patriarchal set up of the society. A girl has not the equal rights in the matters of her father's property as her brother enjoys this privilege. Even in the matter of Sex a woman is not treated at par with her male counterpart. A man has every right to fulfil his sexual desire, no matter if he has to cross over the social boundaries but the same right is denied to a woman in this so called male dominated society. In matters of wealth, equal rights or even sex a woman always feels marginalised. This results into a traumatic experience. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy has very cautiously presented the social condition of women. We are shocked to see that Mammachi maintains a double norm for her son and her daughter in the matters of sex. Her ideas here betray sex bias as well as class bias to an outrageous extent. Her daughter as well as her son is a divorcee but she applies two different norms to their sex relation. To her son, Chacko, she permits “Men's needs” and does not mind his flirting with “pretty women who worked in the factory” (GOD

65). She also provides a secret entrance to his son's bedroom "so that the objects of his 'Needs' wouldn't have to go traipsing *through* the house" (GOD 169). When Baby Kochamma raised the issue of Chacko's libertine relationships with the women in the factory, Mammachi became tense and tight-lipped:

"He can't help having a Man's Needs,' she said primly.

Surprisingly, Baby Kochamma accepted this explanation, and the enigmatic, secretly thrilling notion of Men's Needs gained implicit sanction in the Ayemenem House. Neither Mammachi nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko's Marxist mind and feudal libido. They only worried about the Naxalites, who had been known to force men from Good Families to marry servant girls whom they had made pregnant. Of course they did not even remotely suspect that the missile, when it was fired, the one that would annihilate the family's Good Name for ever, would come from a completely unexpected quarter (GOD 168).

Mammachi also pays the women for her son's Men's Needs.

Arundhati Roy's women characters also present a very pathetic condition where they have no-says in society and are victims of the male-chauvinism and patriarchal system of society. Whether it be Mammachi, Ammu or Rahel, all suffer due to the black shadow of male-domination. When Ammu returns to her father's home after quitting her husband who had submitted her to the lust of his Manager, Mr. Hollick, Chacko says that she has no "Locusts Stand I" and also says that "What is yours is mine and what is mine is also mine"(Roy 57). It was very painful trauma for Ammu to accept that a woman had no share in her father's house and property. It is ironical enough to see that Baby Kochamma, being a woman herself, plays a vital role in the annihilation of the life of Ammu and did not like even her children, Estha and Rahel. Pappachi is a habitual beater of Mammachi.

Mammachi makes a way for the fulfilment of her son's carnal desires but when it comes to her daughter, Ammu, it is not applicable. She has to renounce Ayemenem House and dies away in a pathetic condition where no one is to mourn over her miserable death.

Kamala Das, an Indian poetess, is a conscious artist raising her voice against the societal oppression of women where even today women have no-say. In her famous poem *An Introduction* she presents her marital experience which is not less than a trauma for a 'girl of sixteen' who is mentally not ready for establishing physical relation with her husband:

"I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat
me.
But my sad woman body felt so much beaten
The weight of my breasts and womb crushed
me. I shrank
Pitifully." (Das 36)

Emily Brontë, the Victorian novelist, is remembered for her single novel *Wuthering Heights* in the entire range of English literature. This novel is a story of retaliation for the failure in love depicting a psychological delirium on the part of Heathcliff for Catherine, his love. Brontë has delineated her characters with the psychological insight what we normally expect from a post-Freudian novelist. Expressing his views about Heathcliff and Catherine, and to a lesser extent Isabella and Edgar, Nicholas Marsh writes:

"They display repressions, denials, drives and expressions of mental anguish – as well as significant mental events they do not understand themselves. We also noticed the importance of unitary state, in childhood, as a focus for feelings of traumatic loss and impossible adult desire. Catherine, in particular, longs to re-enter this state. Childhood is remembered as a time of harmony, while growing up brings division from one's self. Catherine and Heathcliff struggle to escape from the pain of self-

division; and a single 'absolute' state of self-unity is their most powerful desire" (Marsh 166).

When Catherine confides her emotions to Nelly Dean about her childhood love for Heathcliff and her decision of marrying Edgar Linton for social status is overheard by Heathcliff is the one of the traumatic jolt to Heathcliff. What happens throughout the story is result of failure in love. Catherine tells Nelly:

'My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath..." (*Wuthering Heights* 83-84).

Thus we see that the predominant causes of trauma are societal oppression, despair in our relationships, social discrimination, child abuse, marginalization of women, failure in love, outbreak of pandemics, loss of loved ones, personal anguish, sexual assault, wars, riots, genocide and so on. Many writers like Kamala Das, Mulk Raj Anand, Emily Brontë, Arundhati Roy, Margaret Atwood and many more have delved deep into the psyche of their characters to study the traumatic experience they have or might have undergone in their life. These writers have very well presented the pangs of trauma in their writings. In this way trauma has been used very significantly in the interpretation of actions and behavioural patterns of humans in life and literature.

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