

Childhood Trauma and Post-Traumatic Growth: A Study of Trezza Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place*

Mariya Zulal

Research Scholar
Department of English
University of Kashmir

Abstract

Childhood trauma holds a neglected status in psychology as well as in literature. Childhood trauma refers to a stressful situation that takes place in the life of a child aged between 0-18 years which takes such a toll on the mental health of that child, that it ends up influencing and damaging his/her psyche, identity and overall adulthood. As Judith Herman points out that childhood trauma forms and deforms the personality, the same happens to Dolores, a five-year-old protagonist from Trezza Azzopardi's Booker finalist novel *The Hiding Place* (2000). The protagonist goes through posttraumatic stress disorder which continues to haunt her even in her adulthood. This paper shall attempt to highlight the traumatic experiences of the protagonist which lead to her posttraumatic stress disorder and finally to her posttraumatic growth, a new concept in Trauma studies. It will also attempt to undertake a thematic study of the novel and analyse it with reference to theories put forth by some eminent psychological and sociological theorists such as Judith Herman, John Bowlby, Erving Goffman etc

Key Words: Trauma, childhood, posttraumatic stress disorder, post-traumatic growth, stigmatisation, dysfunctional family

Introduction

Trauma, a word, so exhaustively used nowadays, has become a popular concept in our existence. Derived from a Greek word "traumatikos", it refers to a physical wound caused by some external factors. But the term has journeyed from one discipline to another i.e., from medicine to psychoanalysis and ultimately to literary studies. As the word has different connotations nowadays, the meaning of the word also shifted from bodily wound to mental wound. In the mid-19th century, the term grew ductile and absorbent. Sigmund Freud, who laid the foundation to trauma studies by introducing psychoanalytical theory of trauma, defines trauma in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as a certain incident that causes "disturbances of mental capacities" and involves risk to life where "fright, fear and anxiety are improperly used as synonymous expressions" (6). To understand the concept of trauma in literary studies, according to Roger Kurtz, it can be understood under the light of five main precursive components. Those five elements are psychoanalysis, modernism, deconstruction, holocaust and acceptance of PTSD as a medical category (2). The model of trauma that Freud presents claims that trauma is unrepresentable but the newer models of trauma consider the unrepresentability as one among many responses to the extreme event that takes place in the life of an individual.

Coming to the origin contemporary trauma studies, it started with the agitation of Vietnam veterans and this agitation resulted in the recognition of a new disorder called posttraumatic stress disorder, which was quite prevalent in the veterans after the war. This agitation thus resulted in the inclusion of posttraumatic stress disorder in the diagnostic and statistical of mental disorder (DSM 3) in the year 1980 and was considered a real diagnosis. DSM 3 defines the external stressor for posttraumatic stress disorder as an overwhelming event “outside the range of usual human experience” that results in “fear, terror and helplessness” causing distress in an individual (APA 236-238, 248). Trauma causes a speechless fright and the effects it produces, causes rupture in personality and breach in identity.

When we talk of trauma viz a viz literary studies, it emerged in 1990s with Cathy Caruth’s ground-breaking publication of an essay collection and a book called *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) respectively. In her most famous definition of trauma she states, “...an overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophic events in which the response to an event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon” (11). Trauma appears in the form of deferred experiences that tortures the individual by repeatedly intruding them through nightmares and flashbacks. She focuses on impossibility of narration and believes that trauma can be transformed into narrative but this very narration can destroy and distort the truth (153). In the same way, other theorists like Geoffrey Hartman, Laurie Vickroy and Anne whitehead too put emphasis on the unrepresentability of trauma.

As this field has gained elasticity, a lot of work has been done on trauma studies. Be it feminist trauma, racial trauma, war trauma; these mainstream traumas have been exhaustively worked on. But when there is a mention of childhood trauma in literary studies or psychology, little has been explored in this field. This field has remained untouched and has been neglected since the dawn of history. On the official website of National Institute of Mental Health, childhood trauma is described as “the experience of an event by a child that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects.” The traumatic experience results in having a disastrous impact on a child’s identity and individuality which in turn affects his adulthood to a great extent. Trauma and posttraumatic disorder are interlinked; the former leads to the latter. Research has always neglected the fact that childhood trauma does not only affect personality formation but causes serious developmental disturbances (Steinberg et.al 331-358). It was because a child was considered a mute and innocent spectator who was engulfed in his own dream world. It was believed that if ever they experienced a traumatic incident in their life, it would hardly affect them. Their resilient powers help them forget the incident within days and they go on to with their lives normally (which is definitely not the case). In literature too, child has been given an invisible and insignificant status. A child was only used as a mouthpiece to depict the social evils present in the society. A child’s mental state when it comes in contact with a traumatic situation was something that the writers were not concerned about. Novels like *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and so on provided us with a storyline of a traumatized child but the novels were only meant for eradication of social evils. The child psyche or childhood trauma was not a concern for the writers but after 1990s such novels were seen in the light of trauma theory. Child psyche was thus given priority and trauma’s negative influence on cognitive development and psyche of a child became a concerning issue for the writers in general.

Analysis

In contemporary fiction, we have a colossus of works related to trauma and childhood trauma and one such work is Trezza Azzopardi's debut novel *The Hiding Place* (2000). Presenting the story of six daughters of a poor family through the point of view of a five-year-old Dolores, the story mainly manifests how the daughters, especially Dolores becomes the major victim of family induced trauma. The writer peeps through the poor and destitute lives of Cardiff immigrants in 1960s and shows how dysfunctional families lead to disintegration of families and can be a source of trauma to its members especially children. Dolores Gauci lives with her father Frankie Gauci, a Maltese immigrant, her mother Mary and her five sisters Celesta, Marina, Luca, Rosa and Fran. The narration moves between auto diegetic narration and omniscient narration. Divided into two parts, the first part deals with Dolores' bleak childhood and the second part, which shows the lapse of thirty years, Dolores confronts her traumatic past on the occasion of her mother's funeral.

Dolores, the major victim of familial trauma is considered to be a bad luck the day she is born. She goes through unprecedented trauma at the hands of her father, her sisters and her neighbours. In her infancy she almost loses her hand due to the carelessness of her mother, thus her disfigured hand becomes a source of stigmatisation for her. She is labelled by several derogatory names like "crip", "il demone" etc by her sisters and "Bambina" by her superstitious father who lost in gambling the day Dol was born. In *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction* (2013), Christa Schnofelder states, "The disfigured body, which bears the mark of the protagonist's primary traumatic experience of being injured in a fire, becomes and object of stigmatisation and leads to cycles of physical and verbal violence." (280)

The novel overall depicts the suffering of the daughters at the hands of their barbaric and irresponsible father whose abuse and uncivil acts affect not only her daughters but her wife as well. It is towards the end of the first part, that the latter succumbs to the overwhelming stress and has a panic attack. With the result, the daughters are taken to foster care; thus, leading to the disintegration of the family.

The adult Dolores, after thirty years, is ready to confront her past which seems to be the first step for her recovery. The display of Posttraumatic Growth in her is emphasized by her struggle on coming to terms with her past.

"While the first part highlights Dolores' solitary attempt at coming to terms with the past, the second foregrounds her urge to find a sense of consistency with her sisters about their shared past, emphasizing her longing for a familial community of memory. Through its emphasis on Dolores' pervasive desire for consistency, order and understanding the novel testifies to the psychological needs of victims of childhood trauma." (Schnofelder 280)

Dolores' father becomes a major source of her unprecedented trauma. As he waits for a son to be born after five daughters, seeing a new born girl again, he is distraught. One who was an embodiment of good luck before becomes an embodiment after sometime as she is labelled as "bambina"- a word which means bad luck. Thus, she becomes a target of her father's hatred as he vents out his frustrations on his daughters especially Dolores who says, "I slept in the chest, when I was new born. My mother told me how she wrapped me in a shawl at night and hid me from my father." (Azzopardi 5). She is deathly scared of her father. Whenever he

comes home, her mother makes it a point that she doesn't come in front of him as he can't stand her presence. There is an instance in the text where she realises it and says, "I must keep away out of my father's way." (6) All the family members suffer due to his gambling because he "will gamble on anything that moves." (7) His gambling costs him his two daughters (one is married to a man of his father's age and the other is given to Joe Madera in exchange for an apartment and some money) and finally his house. Her mother too fails to protect her kids. She is sandwiched between her responsibility to protect her kids and to save the family from destitution. She is overtly stressed throughout the novel which culminates in her mental breakdown at the end.

Attachment to a specific figure be it mother, father or any other caregiver is important for the development of a child but if the attachment figure is unresponsive or unavailable, a high level of distress occurs in the child which causes immense stress and becomes a major source of childhood trauma, thus affecting their developing years and adulthood. John Bowlby's Attachment theory states, "Attachment behaviour ...leads to the development of affectional bonds or attachments, initially between child and parent and later between adult and adult" (38). Dolores becomes a victim of such trauma. Her parents show least response when she needs them the most. A child with disability should be cared more than the other siblings but it does not happen. They show no compassion to her, especially her father, who proves to be a monstrous figure in her life; the source of all her major traumas. Dolores, being a kid, tries to shield her parents by blaming herself for certain things and considers her family as her protector which is obviously not the case. Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) when talking about childhood trauma says that the children who are engulfed in familial trauma shroud the unresponsiveness and failure of their parents and force themselves to create an image of them as being protective and good. In the effort of doing so, children tend to blame themselves for all the unfortunate events taking place in their lives and this imbibes a sense of guilt in them. Neither Dolores' mother is as loving or protective as she presents her nor there ever arises any kinds of pangs of consciousness in her father as she claims.

Dolores' sisters, too, leave no stone unturned in bullying her. Calling her by several derogatory labels further drags her down to the abysmal depths of trauma. Celesta and Rosa, her elder two sisters whom she doesn't know much, don't even let her come near them. Dolores says, "Celesta and Rosa, my other two sisters...have pinned a notice on the door which i can't read but which I know says, "KEEP OUT. THIS MEANS YOU! I think it means me. I imagine they are serious." (Azzopardi 4). Rose and Luca consider her inferior due to her burnt hand. They use her as an outlet to vent out their anger that they have for their parents' way of upbringing. Her sisters are so influenced by their fathers superstitious labelling of Dolores as devil, as embodiment of bad luck and so on, that they begin to participate in this ritual of labelling her by such names. According to Christa Schonfelder, "Dolores' account of her childhood suggests that her father's rhetoric of cursedness had a powerful impact on her familial and social environment, especially on her sisters." (288)

But what becomes the major source of her childhood trauma is her left hand that had got burnt when she was just a month old. Becoming an object of fear for people, she is stigmatised and bullied for her "bad hand" (125). Her hand plays a crucial role as it is more of a source of her stigmatisation rather than her trauma of losing a body part. Due to her burnt hand, she is stigmatised by her father, her sisters, her neighbours and even her classmates who refuse to sit with her. She becomes the object of staring outside which makes her go

through all sorts of inferiority complexes. Her mother doesn't let her go outside nor can she play with her sisters in the square. We can feel her urge to feel like normal human beings which is slammed down when she says, "I can't play...and I can't go to school.... Rose says it's because I'm bad luck and I mustn't be seen." (Azzopardi 79) This lack of a certain thing make her crave for it so much that she starts dreaming about her hand. She dreams of "holding the rope with both her hands" (80) as Freud states that dreams tend to show the desires that remain unfulfilled in one's life. Also, when one of her sisters tries to put some powder on her hand which makes her scar look "invisible" makes her happy. Canadian Sociologist Erving Goffman gave a theory called theory of Stigmatisation and in the preface to his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), he describes stigma as "the situation of an individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance." In this type of stigma, a person is considered undesirable and is not fully accepted in society, thus he is ostracized and rejected. Same is the case with Dolores who never gets out of the shackles of this stigma, not even in her adulthood. In sociological theory, stigma plays an important role and spoils the individual's identity. The visibility of her hand and scarred face function as key organs that decide her acceptance in social circle. This stigmatisation of a particular individual associate them with non-humans, which is why his father would lock her in a cage where rabbits lived. She does not fit in the "socio-cultural image of normal human bodies" (Schnofelder 289) and this process of othering becomes a major source of her psychological trauma.

In the second part of the novel, we see Dolores as someone who tries to come to terms with her past. Her quest for recovery is evident when she says, "There's hammering, and darkness, and a high wailing sound which lives inside my head. *I want a cure.*" (Azzopardi 223). As Dolores is the auto diegetic narrator, she becomes the narrator of her own traumatic past. She possesses a desire to bring order and stability in her life by sharing her past and her memories with her sisters who don't seem to be interested in this exercise. Her sisters, on the contrary, don't remember and believe most of the things that Dolores says which makes a reader question the reliability of Dolores' past. Her sisters even show least interest when Dol tries to bond with them. Her sisters are still under the perception that she is the bad luck for them as they need a scapegoat on whom they can put all the blame. Her sisters make it difficult for her to recover as Dol "is forced to realise that some of her memories are false" (304). But she finds her companion in Celesta's son, Louis, who supports her search for memories, although it's not clear how much reliability could be there in Dolores' narration.

Despite the discouraging factors that she comes across, she is still able to manifest Posttraumatic growth (PTG), a novel concept in Trauma studies. As traumatic incidents bring immense stress to an individual and leads to negative behavioural changes, PTG focuses on positive growth that takes place in an individual. A person not only survives trauma but also experiences positive changes and growth in him/her. Dolores shows signs of Posttraumatic Growth when she narrates her story and expresses her thoughts. Being highly vocal about her past becomes the first step for posttraumatic growth. She now accepts her fate of having a burnt hand and deliberately makes an attempt to show her hand to people especially her sisters which she's been hiding for so long. Thus, her helplessness gets turned into strength. She rejects the state of hiding and accepts what used to be her "flaw". She "not only displays an acceptance of her hand's physical difference but now also consciously chooses visibility and exposure, rejecting the state of hiding and invisibility that her family used to assign her" (Schnofelder 307). Dolores accepts her traumatic childhood which is denoted by her decision

to take certain things to her new home which includes a dice, a photograph and a chest that she used to sleep in. Although the chest reminds her of her abusive father and childhood trauma in general, nevertheless she takes it; manifesting her positive growth due to that very trauma. We see her development from being a victim of trauma to the survivor of trauma.

In conclusion, we see the importance of a loving and functional family in the life of a child and how familial bonds can be a source of disintegration as well as the source of recovery as in Dolores' case, the latter is "crucially connected to the family" (Schonfelder 312).

References:

Primary Sources

Azzopardi, Trezza. *The Hiding Place*. Picador, 2000.

Secondary Sources

Balaev, Michelle. "Trauma Studies." *Wiley Online Library*, 30 Jan. 2018, onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118958933.ch29.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. John Hopkins UP, 1996.

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books, 1992.

Kumar, Kamayani and Angelie Multani, editors. *Childhood Traumas: Narratives and Representations*. Routledge, 2019.

Mambrol, Nasrullah. "Trauma Studies." *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 15 July 2020, literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma-studies.

Schnöfelder, Christa. *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction*. Transcript Verlag, 2013.

Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.

American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-III*. 3rd ed. Rev. Washington: American Psychiatric Assn., 1987.

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Simon & Schuster Inc., 1963.

Bowlby, John. *Loss, Sadness and Depression*. Basic Books, 1980.