

Representation of Trauma in Narrative: a Comparative Study of Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract: This paper is a comparative study of the representation of trauma in Anita Desai's "*Cry, The Peacock*" and Toni Morrison's "*Beloved*". By investigating the arguments that happen in social studies, psychoanalysis and literary fiction about trauma and narrative, the relationship between them—that comes out as a result of investigation—is paradoxical. What is more, is that narrative is an essential tool for both "working-through" and bearing witness to the traumatic event(s); it can also be used deliberately or accidentally to generate a false version of events. The narratives selected for the study are concerned about trauma and narrative on the thematic as well as formal level. The protagonists from both the novels are depicted as individuals suffering from the effects of trauma, and both of them seek to bypass their trauma by generating falsify versions of their experiences and by changing the interpretation of their trauma through the mode of "working through". Thus, it results in affording a process of interpreting the hermeneutic of sufferings, which is one of the prime concerns of trauma and narrative in contemporary time.

Keywords: Representation, Narrative, Trauma, Belatedness, Working-through, Murder

The word 'trauma', which literally means wound or external damage, is derived from the Greek word. Initially, the state of physical affliction, which was believed to be a bodily affliction, dominated the story of the evolution of trauma studies. Later, the combined struggles of socio-political forces and multi-disciplinary approaches have shifted the movement of trauma study from the physical to the psychological level. And Judith Herman beautifully presents those struggles in a concise way in the introduction of her work *Trauma and Recovery*. She says:

Three times over the past century, a particular form of psychological trauma has surfaced into public consciousness ... The first to emerge was hysteria, the archetypal psychological disorder of women ... The second was shell shock or combat neurosis. Its study began in England and the United States after the First World War and reached its peak after the Vietnam War. .. The last and most recent trauma to come into public awareness is sexual and domestic violence ... Our contemporary understanding of trauma is built upon a synthesis of these three separate lines of investigation (Herman 9).

Further, the various methods used in the treatment of trauma, and the leading changes that enhance the understanding of trauma are vital in discovering the development of trauma theory that leaves its impact on the literary imagination, particularly its connotation toward the interpretive act.

Thereafter, in 1996, Freudian theorist Cathy Caruth's book entitled "*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*", considered to be a fundamental work in the development of trauma theory, provides a comprehensive framework through psychoanalytic approach for reading of traumatic experiences, further exploring the structure of traumatic events and belated experience.

In the introduction entitled "The Wound and the Voice", Caruth not only shows why Freud has used a literary text to explain the concept of traumatic repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* but also discusses how he has used the story of Tasso. And her interpretation of Tasso's story opens up a conclusion regarding the nature of trauma:

What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud's writings on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language (Caruth 4).

Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, that is, 'belatedness', is the central theoretical perspective of Caruth's trauma theory that refers to the experience in which memory revisits a trauma-victim to haunt. Thereafter, Caruth defines her understanding of trauma "as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but later return in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 91). Alternatively, Michelle Balaev in "Trends in Trauma" considers trauma as a "person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society"

(Balaev 1). It is a brain's inability to cope up with a non-normal experience—although it varies from person to person—and its peregrinate life-threatening events. Further, studies of trauma have revealed that the sequence of events—that is an interaction among the events—is the common framework for understanding the nature of trauma. As Jean Laplanche explains it:

“Trauma consists of two moments: the trauma, in order to be psychic trauma, doesn't occur in just one moment. First, there is the implantation of something coming from outside. And this experience, or the memory of it, must be reinvested in a second moment, and then it becomes traumatic. It is not the first act which is traumatic, it is the internal reviviscence of this memory that becomes traumatic” (Nadal and Calvo 3).

Further, applying theoretical approaches of trauma to literature, Dominick LaCapra differentiated between 'acting-out' and 'working through' evolved from Freudian notion of “melancholia' and 'mourning' which are two possible psychological reactions connected to loss. 'Acting out' means an irresistible and repetitive re-living of the trauma through flashbacks, hallucination, or dreams, which can be seen unconsciously and hence captured in the past that causes wound to victim whereas 'working-through', which happens through a conscious mind and is the most troublesome response to trauma, encourages individuals to mourn over the suffering from the past and present; and it, further, forces the individuals to consider how things might be different and takes risk of acting to challenge and distinguish past, present, and future.

Anita Desai, also known as the Mother of the genre of Indian psychological novels, is one of the finest woman-voices in Indian writing in English. She has portrayed the existing socio-cultural perspective of India through her fictions. Many of her plots deal with the inner feeling of her female characters; and by doing so, she explores the psychological states of her characters, and how these psychological states affect one's psyche to an overwhelming event(s). And, her novel '*Cry, The Peacock*' depicts the personal consequences of domestic trauma: the trauma that happens at the side of a domestic sphere.

On the other hand, Toni Morrison is a famous Afro-American novelist. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, and she became the first black woman to accomplish so. Her writings often focus on the experiences of 'black' in the United States, particularly on the experiences of women. After the publication of *Beloved*, Morrison was acknowledged as an international celebrated novelist. Like the rest of her novel, *Beloved* also deals with the trauma of racism in America. Besides that, the novel also focuses on the immediate trauma on account of slavery and its effects on the protagonist's personal level as well as in domestic affairs.

The selected novels deal with personal trauma, and its narrative tries to falsify trauma in terms of the protagonist's desire to protect himself/herself or others from a reality that seems disturbing and frightening. These novels represent a particular traumatic event(s) and demonstrate the traumatic consequences on their protagonists, and both the protagonists take a path of violence to get rid of their trauma, being helpless. Thus, in *Cry, the Peacock* as well

as in *Beloved*, the authors illustrate their protagonists' sufferings from the consequences of their traumatic experiences.

Desai commences *Cry, the Peacock* with a description of Maya witnessing the death of her pet dog and the condition of Toto's (Maya's pet dog) death body, and presents her immediately as a sufferer of trauma. The death of the pet dog is an innocuous event, not an extraordinary incident, to which Maya and her husband, Gautama, reacts differently. Being a childless woman after three years of her marriage, Toto is to her an adopted son with whom she likes to play in her loneliness—the only one she is always accompanied by in the absence of Gautama. What is more, besides her attachment with Toto, is the fact that the event of Toto's death compels her to recall the prophecy, made by an Albino during her child and which remained buried in her mind in the course of time, that one of the couple would die, that too an unnatural death. And after the event of Toto's death, she is haunted as well as traumatized by the prophecy and starts living with fear of death, which raids her mind day and night. Further, the novel also shows that when a person is traumatized, the person not only poses a threat to his/her own life but also becomes dangerous for their near or dear ones. This event is shown in the case of Gautama because neither does he show an overwhelming response to the event of death nor does he become obsessed with death after the demise of Toto. But Maya's obsession with the prophecy as well as Toto's death determines the course of Gautama's life.

Morrison's *Beloved* also depicts Sethe's, the protagonist, suffering due to the effects of trauma. She experiences very disturbing memories of her past as a slave, which haunts her mind on a daily basis. Even though she flees from the physical trauma of slavery, her past experiences at the Sweet home as a slave makes sure that she cannot run away from her memories of that time; what is more is that along with those pathetic memories, her traumatic past possesses her physically. At the commencement of the novel, her domicile, i.e., 124, is haunted by a ghost that she thinks to be the spirit of her daughter Beloved, who is killed with a saw by her. Later, Beloved, the mysterious and indeterminate character of the novel, possesses Sethe's life. In addition to that, the novel not only shows the effect of trauma in relation to those who directly suffer from it but also illustrates the effects in terms of next-generation who never directly goes through the event, and this event has been reflected through Sethe's younger daughter, Denver. Denver is so terrified that she leaves the house by knowing the fact that unknown something forces her mother to kill her own daughter; as a result, even though she never goes through the experience of slavery, its traumatic effects on her mother decides her life too.

The detailed investigation of these two novels shows the manner in which a falsifying narrative has been created deliberately or accidentally as a response to trauma at the level of the protagonist's personal experiences. Both the protagonists are presented as if they are trying to present a false version of their traumatic experiences. Both the Protagonists' attempt to falsifying their trauma has been created to show the protagonist's intention to defend themselves from the reality that seems to them very frightening as well as very terrifying.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, witnessing the event of death of Toto forces Maya's psyche to invoke the prophecy that remains buried in her mind in the course of time. The event of death that facilitates to emerge the prophecy possessed her mind completely and Maya becomes obsessed with death because of the prophecy which foretells that within the four years of their marriage, one of the couple would die that too unnatural one. Most importantly, the novel also begins in her fourth year of marriage, and she foresees her own death through the

death of Toto. The event of Toto's death troubles her mind of peace, and at that very night, she searches for support from Gautama through sexual relationship. Therefore, being calm and refreshed after a bath, she comes to bed in her white nightclothes but her action fails to tempt Gautama. She tries her best to confess her lonesomeness and to appraise her terror of death but left unaided. She felt that the prophecy of the astrologer would come true very soon and she would be the one to die, but she is in love to live her life. Her desperateness to live and the fear of prophecy on the basis of which she interprets her trauma that provokes her to kill Gautama; as a result, her act of mariticide is a response to the overwhelming event that she went through after Toto's death as the prophecy makes its return and haunt her in her loneliness. Maya kills Gautama not only judging him as the main cause of her sufferings as she lacks carnal pleasure and attachment but also considering this act of killing as a means of protecting herself, bypassing it to Gautama, from an unforeseen death. What is more surprising is that she also defends her act of killing her husband in the hope of living whereby she states that as Gautama does not have any attachment towards her or towards the world, it does not matter to him whether he lives or dies. It is she who suffers and screams in the mute horror.

In *Beloved*, Morrison's argument is that Sethe's attempt to deny her trauma is to suppress the trauma of slavery she went through at Sweet Home. As a result, she attempts to recreate her traumatic slave life at Sweet Home, where she along with her husband, Halle, and the other six male slaves is able to reside blissfully together. Therefore, she gives reference only to the time period of Mr. and Mrs. Garner as the slaves were treated comparatively well during their ownership of Sweet Home. She attempts to overlook the events that happened at Sweet Home during the ownership of the Schoolteacher when he along with his nephews takes the charge of Sweet Home after the death of Mr. Garner. She even declines to remember the torture inflicted on her back and the other slaves, their fruitless escape and the consequent murder of many of the slaves, and also the violence and chastisement inflicted by Schoolteacher's nephews on her. Later, although Sethe successfully escapes from Sweet Home, yet she is tracked down by Schoolteacher's nephews and attempt to bring back Sethe and her children. Sethe, being helpless and to spare her children from the bondage of slavery, tries to kill her all children but manages to kill only her two-year-old daughter, Beloved. She also denies to encounter the complex reasons that forces her to murder her younger daughter. She tries to justify the horrible act of infanticide as an act of motherly love, instead of accepting the fact that traumatic life of slavery has deformed her notion or sense of maternity so much that she tries to name the heinous act of infanticide as an act of motherly love. Sethe's efforts of refusal of her traumatic past and consequential arrival of Beloved offer her an opportunity to confront the past. And once Sethe confronts Beloved, she is trapped with Beloved along with her past.

In sum, after analyzing the narratives, it can be noticed that both the writers, to illustrate their protagonists' sufferings, have used two major methods: protagonists' imagination to bring the effects of trauma, and their reasons of violence against their nearer or dearer ones that come from the protagonists' experiences and perceptions of the world belatedly. Both the protagonist falsify their trauma, be it a personal experience or a traumatic reality. And the consequences of their attempt to get rid of the effects of trauma and the reason for their violence have been portrayed by both the authors deliberately. As a result, both the characters, Maya as well as Sethe, bear their witness of trauma through their 'work-through'. Thus, these two novels explore how narrative can be adopted as a mode of falsification in order to witness trauma.

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