

Trauma and Mental Illness: A Rereading of Manto's "Toba Tek Singh"

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Abstract:

The narratives of mental trauma and the recollection of the untold memories associated with the Partition violence in the characters of Manto's "Toba Tek Singh" find space in the present study. The study has highlighted an overview of the post-traumatic stress disorder in Bishen Singh, a victim of the Partition violence. Cathy Caruth's model on trauma has been taken under consideration as the theoretical framework of the study. The paper emphasizes on the negative effect of the Partition on mental health as presented in Manto's "Toba Tek Singh". How trauma can lead to serious disasters is focused on in the paper.

Keywords- Partition, PTSD, Trauma and Violence

Introduction:

The irrevocable damage caused to the psyche by the traumatic experience is discussed by Cathy Caruth in her groundbreaking work *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The book digs into the relationship among trauma, literature and psychoanalysis. She delves deep into the fact that literature can serve as a witness to traumatic experiences. She describes trauma as an experience that has not been totally processed into one's narrative.

Trauma is the crisis of emotional understanding and meaning to any devastating or overwhelming event of one's life which may surface later through ways unanticipated. She defines trauma as the inhibition to simple understanding and reparation. Cathy Caruth believes and claims that direct linguistic demonstration is prevented and consciousness too is disjointed owing to the occurrence of traumatic incidents in one's life. The severity of trauma is such that it damages one's psyche irrevocably. Caruth discusses how traumatic experiences disrupt normal understanding and exceeds conventional human comprehension and integration. There is an inefficiency to fully process and integrate the experience of trauma into an organic single narrative.

The belated nature of trauma is reflected in delayed response. As the traumatic events do not get processed during the time of occurrence, they tend to reassert in a person's psyche repeatedly through flashbacks or dreams. The lasting impact of trauma is displayed through repetitive patterns. These reassertion or recurrence happens to make a complete understanding of the non-comprehended happenings of the past that gives rise to trauma. The memories which are unassimilated erupt during the occurrence of any devastating event. Traumatic memories intrude into the present in many unsettling and unexpected ways. The survivor's sense of time and being is fragmented or distorted by the intrusive flashbacks which are disjointed in nature and are comprehensive within a coherent framework of meaning. Normal way of comprehension is hindered as memories blur the present due to the eruption of them in a sudden manner.\

Trauma affects cultures and communities along with affecting individuals. It can be a fundamentally relational experience. Caruth studies how trauma echoes through collective memory and affects human psyche in a negative and damaging way. The ways in which traumatic experience reflects through the rapture of individual and collective memory are presented through Caruth's model of trauma theory.

Partition and trauma

"Toba Tek Singh" is set against the backdrop of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent into two

halves in 1947. The atrocities of the inmates of the asylum whose identities got altered overnight leaving them confused concerning their fractured belongingness is explored by Manto in the story. The story illustrates how trauma affects the psyche of agonized men in the wake of the Partition. Manto being an eyewitness to the Partition showcases the trauma associated with it in a very honest and crude manner. He criticizes the evil consequences of the Partition on the human psyche. Through the setting of a mental asylum, Manto explores the psychological trauma of the victims of the Partition.

The absurdity of the Partition has been rightly showcased through the story. Due to the partition of the Indian subcontinent into two halves in 1947, millions of people are displaced which results into deep seated trauma. People remain unhealed owing to the deep psychological and emotional scars gained from the trauma of the Partition. The story reveals the psychological trauma suffered by people due to the Partition. The senseless violence and disruption caused by the Partition is critiqued by Manto. The characters undergo immense suffering as they are displaced during the Partition. The violence associated with the idea of national identity is critiqued by Manto. The widespread devastating effect of the historical event of the Partition is laid bare by Manto through the story. What Manto is trying to portray is the contribution of the deep seated political and religious tension to internal trauma of the individuals and the communities as a whole. The victims display some symptoms of PTSD as they cannot recover from the scars left behind. The experience of traumatized characters such as Bishen Singh can be viewed through the lens of “trauma theory”.

The psychological traumatic effects of the violence of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent are captured by Manto in the story which highlights the impact of displacement on the psyche of Bishen Singh, the protagonist. Bishen Singh known as Toba Tek Singh, a prosperous landlord who grows mentally unstable is brought to the asylum by his family. Toba Tek Singh is struggling with the trauma of his past. The abnormal behaviour of Bishen Singh is reflective of post traumatic stress disorder. “Oper di gurgur di annexe di bay dhina di mung di daal of the laltain” (Manto 49-50). The symptoms of PTSD such as flashbacks and anxiety disorders are reflected in the character of Bishen Singh who tries to escape the current situation for the time being. The long term effects of traumatic experiences on human beings which get reflected later on are highlighted through Bishen Singh’s character. “According to Cathy Caruth, the grief aroused by an external source impels internal changes in the mind thereby irreversibly changes one’s identity” (Magishavarthini 757).

A very common feature of PTSD which is hypervigilance can be seen in Bishen Singh’s behavior. He keeps on seeking information and asking questions about his destiny. This being a state of hypervigilance is experienced by him. Bishen Singh is constantly anxious and remains agitated throughout the story which is a symptom of PTSD. He lives in his past, experiences flashbacks, gets disconnected with the present reality and remains in a state of confusion. This is a common symptom of patients experiencing PTSD. He also is not being able to accept the current reality and experiences a state of delusion. “Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox; that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. (Caruth 91-92) When the patients are being transferred across the border, they exhibit abnormal behaviour. They start tearing off their clothes, turning naked. How the other patients behave in a very chaotic manner reflecting their resistance to get transferred is highlighted by Manto. Some engaged in fights start running wildly in various directions. Some start weeping, singing, and hurling abuse. These already vulnerable people lose total control in this traumatic situation. This emotional distress is reflective of the trauma they are undergoing. The larger trauma caused by the havoc of the Partition on individuals and community is reflected by Manto. This is marked by chaos, confusion, distress and loss of order.

Another lunatic mentioned in the story is Mohammad Ali. His mental instability is connected with the trauma that he has experienced due to the Partition. The trauma caused by dislocation, disruption in the sense of identity due to uncertainty surrounding the idea of Toba Tek Singh’s

location is the reason of Ali's madness.

How a radio engineer, who has an M. Sc degree suddenly turns mad is also depicted in the story. This man is profoundly affected by the ongoing debate concerning the Partition. This action of his is a response to the emotional trauma he is silently experiencing. His reactions are indicative of the fact that he is deeply overwhelmed and disturbed by the havoc of the Partition. This action is an external manifestation of the trauma and stress caused due to the Partition.

Manto's alcoholism

Manto's stories are fueled by his own struggles with addiction which reflect his turmoil that he underwent in his life. The stories are shaped by his own experiences with alcoholism and personal tumult which are reflective of his own struggles. "Noting the high rates of comorbidity of alcohol addiction and mood disorders, Hashmi and Aftab have suggested that Manto used alcohol for self-medication arguing that he 'sought refuge in substance abuse to ease his psychological pain' (213, 1096)" (Jokinson and Abdullah 90). His addiction has influenced him in depicting the characters as very life like who are vulnerable and blemished individuals battling their inner demons. His personal struggles and his experience with addiction have influenced his portrayal of the harsh realities of life. The complexities of human psychology, the depiction of human condition in the face of extreme adversity and the undistorted exploration of human nature are well explored by him. What are profoundly intertwined with his literary works are his inner turmoil and his experiences with alcohol.

It is not wrong to claim that the story is coloured by Manto's own addiction to alcohol. Manto's own struggles coupled with trauma have influenced him into choosing the mental asylum as the backdrop of the story. Manto's own struggle with finding constancy and coherence amidst chaos is similar to that of the experience of Bishen Singh. Manto as well as Bishen Singh have experienced disorientation and confusion in their lives due to the chaos of the Partition. His addiction to alcohol might have been a coping mechanism to survive the havoc of the Partition violence.

Metaphor of Madness

The socio-political imbrications of madness owing to the Partition of the Indian subcontinent are narrated in a vivid manner. Manto uses the metaphor of madness to highlight the political issues of the country. He problematizes the idea of logic through the world of the asylum. The madness of the inhabitants symbolizes the insane decision of the political leaders concerning the exchange of inmates across the border. Manto using the prison as the microcosm of the world draws our attention to the madness associated with the Partition. Manto's exploration of a lunatic asylum in Lahore provides a glimpse of the world of clinical madness. By using the trope of madness, Manto highlights the insanity and irrationality of the Partition. Madness is a logical response to the situation created by the Partition. The idea of sanity is questioned by Manto through the depiction of madness. He further lays bare what is meant to be sane in an insane world.

The madness of the inmates of the asylum mirrors the dehumanizing effect of the Partition; the chaos and insanity of the outside world. The decision of the Indian government to initiate the exchange of the inmates of the asylum created an air of turbulence within them. Bishen Singh's madness can be viewed as a coping mechanism for the mental trauma caused by the havoc of the Partition. His madness reflects the chaos and irrationality of the world around him. Some scholars are of the opinion that the insanity is a way to escape the hardship of reality and reject the absurd situation they are in.

Conclusion

To conclude, "Toba Tek Singh" highlights the deep and lasting impact of psychological trauma on individuals as well as communities. By filtering "Toba Tek Singh"'s narrative through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, it is poignantly revealed that the trauma stricken memory is

fragmentary in nature. Again the corrosive effect of trauma on collective identity is also laid bare. Through the exploration of the fragmented memories, the understanding of the human experiences and the lasting impact of trauma can be enriched. The story underscores the necessity to address the traumatic past in order to promote an altruistic future. To respond to the trauma-ridden people's needs by navigating the complexities of trauma is indeed important. Therefore, the analysis throws light on the fact that literature emerges as a powerful tool to illuminate the human cost of trauma and sheds light on the darker aspects of human experiences thereby reflecting the powerful and transformative power of literature.

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