

The Trauma, Inexplicable: A Psychoanalytic Delve into Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence*

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Abstract

Even the most trivial thing can have a great impact on life, in both positive and negative way. Positive effects can always be welcomed as it changes the life of the receiver in a better way. But this is not the same in the case of negative impacts. It can affect them both physically and mentally. The negative impact that a person receive can turn his or her life topsy-turvy. It can create a traumatic collision in their brain in a way collapsing their thinking capacity, mental stability, on the whole, their entire life. These negative impacts can turn their orderly living into a disorder. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is one such disorder which can affect anyone at anytime as a result of any negative or terrifying event they experienced or witnessed in their past. Louise Erdrich, a most prolific Native American writer, has recorded the lifestyle of Native Americans through most of her novels. She herself is a member of Anishinaabe Tribal community and has presented before us the beautiful nature-centred life of these tribes through her native American plots, characters and places. Her novel, *The Sentence* (2021) portrays the life of Tookie, a middle-aged woman who is struggling to cop up with her day-to-day life after a traumatic incident. The present paper, **The Trauma, Inexplicable: A Psychoanalytic Delve into Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence***, analyses the select novel within the framework of Psychoanalytical perspectives on Trauma theory. It is an attempt to bring into limelight the importance of good parenting and happy childhood. It also throws light on how mental disorders sound-like and why it should never be ignored.

Keywords: Impact, Mental Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Trauma.

The word trauma indicates a terrific event or experience that creates a negative impact on the person who went through it. In Psychoanalysis, trauma can engage that person in serious long-term consequences. Adequately, past trauma and traumatic memories can collapse the stability, thinking ability and capacity of the person. Typical causes for trauma can include bullying, domestic violence, sexual abuse, police brutality and particularly childhood experiences to a great extent. Trauma can also be caused by war, treachery, betrayal etcetera. Freud opines that a traumatic incident in the past can divide the psyche, influence memory without even thinking about that or without even a narrative reproduction of the past. The impact of the event resides in the conscious and subconscious memory of the victim and it continues to traumatize him or her.

Any traumatic incident in the past can lead to Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Childhood abuse is often related with a wide range of negative outcomes, including emotional dysregulation and also psychopathological illness like Post-traumatic Stress disorder, Anti-social Personality Disorder and so on. Anyone can be succumbed to PTSD. Anyone who lived through or has witnessed a traumatic event like war, betrayal, abuse, bullying, sexual assault, or a bad accident can be forever in the clutches of PTSD. In the beginning, PTSD is something that is related only to the trauma caused by war and combat exposure was considered to be the main cause of PTSD. It was at first termed as Shell shock as it was mainly associated to battle, fighting, bombardments and violence. Later, it became common among people who were exposed to any kind of negative experience in their life.

People with PTSD have deep and intense disturbing thoughts, nightmares, agitation and flashback. They start losing interest or pleasure in activities and they experience fear, severe anxiety and mistrust. They emotionally detach themselves from others and start to isolate them from society. They even go the extend of destructing themselves to escape out of the trauma. Even though they start avoiding the internal and external reminders of the event, they continuously experience anxiety and can always be caught in a depressed state. They even burst into anger even if without any provocation. Their can never be stable and could never concentrate on anything as they are always in a disturbed state.

The select novel, *The Sentence* by Louise Erdrich deals with the life of Tookie, a middle-aged Ojibwe woman. The novel focus on the social, economic, political and racial tensions that raised during Covid pandemic and then the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin. The central character Tookie can always be seen disturbed through

out the novel and some traces of mental instability can also be found in her. Hallucination, one of the most important symptoms of PTSD can be witnessed throughout the novel. In the beginning of the novel, Tookie can be seen imprisoned for a crime that she has never done. Tookie could be found hallucinating from the beginning of the novel when she was with her best friend Danae. Budgie, Danae's boyfriend, now separated, is dead and she want his dead body to be cremated by herself. She doesn't want it to be owned by Mara, Budgie's new partner. Danae and Tookie get drunk and Danae cries in desperation to get the dead body. It is when, Tookie hallucinates of giving her a dish towel which she used to kill the ants. But soon she realises that she was hallucinating about killing the ants. "I gave her a dish towel for the crying. It was the same dish towel I'd tried to kill the ants with even though I knew I was hallucinating" (5). Again, when the situation gets worse and Danae goes out of control on drugs, Tookie again hallucinates the ants. "The ants came up under my skin" (8). It is evident from her behaviour that she is mentally unstable.

Tookie is so much devoted to Danae. She loves her friend and decides to get the dead body of Budgie from Mara. Danae dresses Tookie like a lady who works in cremation service, "Earth to Earth" (10). Tookie in reality works in a grocery shop and she takes the company truck to get Budgie's body. She fools Mara and gets the body and delivers it to Danae. But later it is revealed that Danae and Mara framed Tookie into this and they used Budgie's body and Tookie for trafficking cocaine. Tookie gets arrested by her own husband Pollux, a tribal-police. "Danae and Mara already talked and made a deal. Thing is, they swear the drug transport via armpit was your idea and the money you accepted was your cut against future profits. Tookie, I'm sorry" (20). It is evident that Tookie got betrayed by Danae. She gets arrested and taken to the prison. "... do you stop loving someone just because they betray you? I don't think so. That's what makes the betrayal hurt so much- pain, frustration, anger..." (Brandon Sanderson, *The Final Empire, Mistborn* 86). A person who is already unstable like Tookie can never bear a treacherous activity from Danae whom she loved the most. It was unbearable for Tookie and the pain, frustration and anger completely affected her fastening her into the fetters of PTSD.

Tookie becomes more and more agitated because of the betrayal from her friend and also the claustrophobic condition of the prison. She pleaded the guards like a mad and so they treated her like a maniac. She started to hallucinate more and more. She hallucinated that Budgie is with her in the prison cell. "Then Budgie came in with me, the door shut, and I began to scream Budgie gloating, the star scarf still tying up his jaw and knotted floppily

atop his head” (25). Another most common symptom of PTSD is fear. Feeling afraid or having intense fear all of a sudden is a sign of panic attack. This sudden fear may come without any solid or obvious reason or when something reminds you of your trauma. It is one of the first signs of PTSD. It occurs due to sudden exposure to anything related to the past trauma. Tookie can be seen succumbed to panic attacks, hallucination and also suicidal tendency during her confinement days. The agony she is going through obviously traces out the pain and anxiety she carries in her heart.

Once the adrenaline of a panic attack hits your system there is no stopping it. I’ve been told that the intensity of a panic attack means it can’t go on forever, but I’ll tell you, it can go on for hours, as it did when Budgie started hissing through his rotten teeth. During these hours I’ve no idea of what I did, but apparently I decided to kill myself by tearing up what I could snatch of my paper clothes, wadding up bits of my pantalets and sleeves, stuffing my nose and mouth. (25)

It is evident from Tookie’s condition that she is haunted by something from her past and it became worse when she got betrayed by her best friend. In prison, she found solace in books and when she got released, Pollux, her husband became her only solace.

Even though Tookie manages to cop up with her life along with the help of Pollux, the trauma she experienced never leaves her alone. Traces of anxiety, panic attack, agitation prolong and with the support of Pollux and their adopted daughter, Tookie somehow started living her life happily. But towards the end of the novel, it is revealed that Tookie was subjected to child abuse and physical assault from her own mother and she had a strained childhood, the main cause for her trauma and PTSD. Dave Pelzer opines that “Childhood should be carefree, playing in the sun; not living a nightmare in the darkness of the soul (*A Child Call “It”* 56). But, Tookie’s mother never gave her a better childhood to cherish but a nightmare that is strong enough to perish her. “How can the person who gave you life and kept you more or less with them by some profound miracle of oversight leave such a scarce impression” (360).

The present paper, **The Trauma, Inexplicable: A Psychoanalytic Delve into Louise Erdrich’s *The Sentence***, is an attempt to bring out the importance of a sound and happy childhood that every parent is bound to give their children.

Many abused children cling to the hope that growing up will bring escape and freedom. But the personality formed in the environment of coercive control is not well

adapted to adult life. The survivor is left with fundamental problems in basic trust, autonomy and initiative.... Establishing independence and intimacy.... She is still a prisoner of her childhood; attempting to create a new life, she reencounters the trauma. (Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* 178)

It is the duty of all to construct a soft, slow and happy childhood to the children and to ensure a better living for them. The paper also focuses on the impact of trauma on the victims life and how significant it is for the whole society to build a happy life for our fellow beings.

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