

READING THE WOUND: TRAUMA IN LISA SEE'S *SHANGHAI GIRLS*

Sermily Terangpi*

Research scholar
Dept of English,
Assam University Diphu Campus

Sivasish Biswas

Professor
Dept of English,
Assam University Diphu Campus

Research Article

Corresponding Author*

Sermily Terangpi

Article History

Received: 05.02.2020

Accepted: 07.02.2020

Published: 08.02.2020



Abstract: The paper is an endeavor to negotiate the implications of trauma which is entrenched in Chinese women's life through a reading of Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls*. It tends to advocate how mental wound surpasses physical agony which creates a rift in a victim's personality. As trauma is an inseparable part of human challenges, for Chinese women it validates the shadowed part of their existence in a patriarchal society coupled with devastation following war. Various traumatic events engulf Chinese women and psychological trauma enters the mind which remains inseparable from their memory. The novel entails how a person inflicted with severe mental injury negotiates trauma.

Keywords: *trauma, patriarchy, war, memory.*

INTRODUCTION

The word trauma is derived from the Greek word '*Traumatikos*' meaning serious wound to the body. Trauma can also be understood as any emotional wound affecting injury to mind or psyche or an event that causes great distress. According to Dejonghe trauma is "*experiencing or helplessness, or horror*" (Dejonghe 294). It can be therefore understood as an emotional and mental response to a terrible event that eventually impacts the mind. Trauma caused from various forms of violence pose a threat to an individual's personality. More than damaging a person physically it tends to harm them mentally and can cause mental and physical breakdown. In the words of Lenore Terr—

"Psychic trauma occurs when sudden unexpected overwhelming intense emotional blow or series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind." (Bloom 2)

Nevertheless, trauma can be deduced as the product of manifold manifestation of violence that eventually disrupts the mind. And predominantly such physical injury or psychological wound alters a

person's life from a normal state to extremely disturbed entity. A person encountering sudden life threatening experience that arouses insecurity, fear, anguish and rage, for instance in case of domestic violence, rape or incest causes trauma that culminates into psychological injury.

In literary discourse, trauma has engaged scholars and critics to interrogate and examine the complexities and nature of representation and language in any literary piece. With the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996) trauma studies garnered considerable significance in literary criticism. As a theory, critic and scholar Caruth explained, 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 wounded that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is otherwise not available. The 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 our language. (Cathy 4)

With Caruth the understanding of trauma has shifted from the event or response to the complex organization of its traumatic experience. Such painful crisis according to her fails to be completely assimilated or experienced at the time of the action rather lately through frequent recall or flashbacks. Such recollection creates a connection between two events- at a crucial time of psychological disaster memory tends to reproduce episodes that are formerly suppressed and are reinterpreted to correspond succeeding actions, desires, and mental developments. She thereby, asserts a belatedness which consists in the traumatic moment, the traumatic experience is never wholly recorded initially, and however it is done in belatedness, reoccurring later as nightmares, flashbacks, disturbing reflections, and frequent representations. The past never seems to leave the victim's present which causes the person to relive the horror and the pain time and again. Thereby, trauma emerges to become involved with the person's identity and is inevitably enacted in the present in such a way that it appears to be happening in the present time.

In the novel *Shanghai Girls* See uses a complex technique that embraces a multilayered narrative structure that bridges the story of two sisters persecuted by trauma. Two sister- Pearl and May's lives have been irreparably destroyed by an array of intrusive forces, but the most violent and cataclysmic event would be the Sino-Japanese war and Pearl and her mother's gang rape. Both sisters withstand the overpowering load of such intrusive force and thereby their traumas are the outcome of constant fear and hardships. And their prolong exposure to the ubiquitous or ever-present fear of subjugation and contempt resulted in what Laura S. Brown called "invisible psychic scar." She elaborated Maria P.P. Root's idea of "insidious trauma," that explained how traumatic events never fail to affect the subject on various levels and with certain intensity.

traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit. (Edkins 5)

Both Pearl and May were going through series of traumatic events and their true identity were smothered and their spirits were broken from the violence they have encountered. Consequently, trauma deprives the victim of the power to fully access and process the turmoil they experience and it pushes the victim to the abysmal extremity of the society. In the course of the novel we find the future of both Pearl and May to be an unstable one and their traumatic past has subdued their imagination which obstructed their present life. The episode of bombing in Shanghai as revealed by Pearl exhibits total chaos and unspeakable horror.

"Debris—glass, paper, bits of flesh, and body parts- hurtles down on me. It's said that the worst part of the bombing experience is the seconds of total paralysis and silence that immediately follow the

initial concussion. It's though- and I think this is an expression used in every culture- time stands still. That's how it is for me. I'm frozen in place." (See 51)

Such close proximity to calamity, an event of utmost horror made Pearl almost paralyzed from the shock and panic. Being a witness to such violent act tend to leave a legacy of emotional wound that takes time to heal. Pearl was in a state of utter confusion, a moment of complete stillness where existence became void. She aptly used the expression "time stands still" to convey the devastating sight after the bombing. She saw horrific things- grievously injured people, severed limbs, shattered bodies, streets filled with pool of blood a, a sight that would perhaps haunt her entire life. For a person exposed to such abominable crisis may suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), as such frightening events without a doubt causes certain psychic injury. Although, PTSD may not be the sole response to a violent event but episode like this develops into certain disorders in the person, like depression and anxiety. The bombing made Pearl utterly helpless and extremely terrified and she actually failed to conceive what was actually happening during the blast.

There can be no words to exactly describe the agony and pain one undergoes because of rape. And to arrive at a comprehensible meaning of such intensive experience requires a careful reading. See captures the monstrosity and bestiality side of human being that completely alters the person's life falling victim to such atrocity. Pearl and her mother's rape arouse deep sympathy and move us beyond words because the pain they encountered is inexpressible. The bodily suffering that Pearl is described below-

I close my eyes and try to ignore everything they're doing...I feel tearing- not like on my wedding night- but something much worse, something searing, as though my insides are torn apart. (See 75)

One ethical question arises as how do we even describe the mental condition of a rape survivor, we can only attempt. We fail to grasp the horrendous price the victim pay all through their lives after such traumatic episode. The aftermath of rape undoubtedly is extremely traumatic; Pearl indignantly describes the physical pain caused as if her inside was torn apart. Perhaps she could not even attempt to exactly describe the excruciating physical pain she endured because she was looking at her mother being repeatedly raped right in front of her eyes. Few after affects of such violent acts comprises of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and prolonged sadness and depression. Herman employs the notion of PTSD to the experience of rape victim and explains the common ramifications of trauma. She suggests a polemical approach to the aftermath of rape that imparts a responsive and an understanding of a trauma that currently estimate it as a collective experience. Herman rendered a language for negotiating the severe mental and physical pain of rape. Her work was essential in delivering the issue of rape into the public sphere as prior to this; rape was not discussed openly as it was considered as a taboo.

One of the most atrocious events of rape is vividly presented in the novel through the episode of mother-daughter gang-rape by Japanese soldiers. Such shameless and bestiality was enacted in the most ruthless manner, as a mother was raped in front of her daughter. Pearl was helpless even though she desperately wanted to help her mother but she could only watch silently.

"Mama, Mama, Mama, I want to cry out, but I don't... I reach out and grab her hand. How can I describe the look that passes between us? We're mother and daughter being rape repeatedly, for all we know until we both die. I see in her eyes my birth, the endless tragedies of mother love, a total absence of hope... All I feel is pain." (See 95)

It becomes problematic to arrive at an accurate and satisfactory explanation to such emotionally charged and moving rendition of human experience. Here, language becomes insufficient to describe the traumatic impact of such painful experience. Pearl's intense words are beyond any doubt the causatum of a disruptive self which stripped off her unique selfhood and dignity. The trauma presented here moves beyond the actual event, exhibiting the destructive and perennial effects of trauma. Both Pearl and her mother were repeatedly raped and the traumatic experience of such violence is extremely overwhelming to be entirely registered in the mind as it happens. The injury and damage of rape is essentially link to the complete rejection of humanness, awareness of that ordeal of infliction and acknowledgement of its ethical violation concerns the rape survivors. The aftermath of rape is without a doubt extremely traumatic as it denies the person dignity and personhood and reconstruction of which is a tedious process. The injury of a rape survivor is such that the identity becomes wounded. Lynne Henderson sums the experience of rape as-

“Rape denies that you are a person, that you exist... whereas woman experience total helplessness and obliteration during rape. When a woman's existence just does not matter, intercourse becomes rape.” (Henderson 226)

Feminist advocators for more than forty years have reacted and made public sexist and prejudiced longstanding conjectures in the law's traditional approach to rape. And even today society tends to treat rape victim to be partly responsible for the act. Furthermore, in the past the law failed to acknowledge and identify various forms of sexual harm as rape. The law was also unsuccessful in providing protection and safeguarding rape survivors. The law at most times failed to effectively punish the perpetrators even if it was prone to criminal decree because the law had huge barriers. Remarkably, liberal feminists challenged the rape law and noted that it was inequitable in that it regarded rape differently than other forms of violent offence and stressed that the law must acknowledge women's legitimacy over her body. Sexual violence suffuses in every facets of gender relations and rape transacted as an instrument of patriarchy.

Through the reading of the novel in the light of trauma faced by Chinese women like Pearl and May, we find the multilayered dimension of severe human experience and its damaging ramifications. Being subjected to various forms of violence and traumatic experience the Chinese women fails at various levels to achieve a true consciousness. The selected novel provide an arena for memories, retrospection, introspection, a space for recollection and unsightly reminiscence that are infested with distress, pain, agony, wound and trauma.

REFERENCE

1. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
2. DeJonghe E. S. et al. *Women survivors of intimate partner violence and post-traumatic stress disorder: Prediction and prevention*. Bioline International. N.p. Oct, 2008.
3. Lynne Henderson, *Rape and Responsibility*, VOL. 11 LAW & PHIL. 127, 141 (1992)
4. Maria P.P. Root, "Resolving "Other" Status: Identity Development of Biracial Individuals," in *Diversity and Complexity in Feminist Therapy*, ed. Laura S. Brown and Maria P.P. Root (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1990).
5. See, Lisa. *Shanghai Girls*, New York. Random House: Inc. 2009. Print.
6. Tally, Robert. "Reading the Original: Alienation, Writing, and Labor in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'." *Blooms Literary Themes*. Vol 1. Ed. Blake Hobby. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House. 2009. 1-10.