

TRAUMA CREATES CHANGE ONE DOESN'T CHOOSE: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO TUMULTUOUS EXPERIENCES REFLECTED IN SELECT AFRO- AMERICAN FICTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Trauma, as defined by Sigmund Freud, is "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind", and this trauma is healed only when 'one has truly in his/her corner'. Trauma may get caused by various unpleasant experiences like war, sexual abuse, domestic hardships, child abuse, etc. Since the relationship between literature and society is axiomatic, overtly or covertly, literary artists have not failed to incorporate this 'trauma psyche' with their emotional 'comfort zone' in their respective output. The current research paper intends to analyze the representation and ramification experienced by Afro- American community in the wake of colour fixation as is the case with the novels like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison and ' *The Bluest Eye* ' (1970) by Toni Morrison. It also throws a flood of light on healing strategies employed by the characters to retrieve their normal self may it be through protest, rebellion, sharing with their ' emotional zone', expressions, etc. and then to rise like a Phoenix.

Keywords: Wound, ramifications, comfort zone, normal self

INTRODUCTION

"I don't run away from my problems. I believe in facing them. So, if your heart hurts, you have to look into what is causing you heartache. The Day it starts hurting is the Day you'll be over with it." Priyanka Chopra, Miss World 2000 on Heartbreak and Healing

As one is aware of, nothing in life is absolute. Everything in life is having different twists and turns, giving birth to different approaches and *isms*. The era of glocalisation, bringing people on root despite being internationalised , has literally created a new vista in Psychology, foreshadowing tumultuousness experienced by the people in the wake of disorientation, dislocation, discrimination domestic abuse etc. worldwide, necessitating its study to heal the afflicted and thus giving birth to this trauma Theory. Even when traumas are all pervading, catches a person at one point in life somewhere, such sensitive phase had not got theoretical approach before. Thanks to Post-modern, post human approaches, such delicate factors started catching clinical concerns and today this 'trauma theory' has turned out to be a matter of critical interest in literary sphere.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Trauma reflected in Afro- American Fictions is the result of 'double marginalisation 'in the wake of colour fixation and Gender discrimination.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To examine the individual or collective group's experience in the context of extreme experience such as rape, war, the Holocaust, slavery, racism, Colonial oppression etc.
- 2) To study the coping patterns and resilience of people both individually and collectively who have undergone a substantial trauma

BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

This research is expected to give following benefits:

- 1) **Theoretical Benefits:** The research paper will make the audience aware of the consequences of traumatic events Afro- American generations underwent in the wake of slavery and colour caste, "two white institutions"
- 2) **Practical Benefits:** After realizing how traumatic experience shatters the individual's sense of self in ways that are intolerable, the readers at their level will find out means regarding facing fears in a safe space and learn coping skill on their own that can help one function on a day- to- day basis.

RESEARCH METHOD

- I) Type of the Research: In this research, the writer resorts to Descriptive- Qualitative method.
- II) Type of Data Required for the Study:
 - a) **Primary Data:** Primary data source of the study are original texts viz ' *Their Eyes Were Watching God*' by Zora Neale Hurston, ' *Invisible Man*' by Ralph Ellison and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison.
 - b) **Secondary Data:** Secondary Sources comprise Psychological Writing by Freud, Jung, features of traumatized state, mind style captured by creative writers when portraying the trauma experienced by the characters and the recorded interviews by the Afro- American writers like Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison in the context of all- pervading trauma experienced by black generation.

TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION

In this case, the writer uses two techniques of collecting data:

- a) **Observation:** This step is used to make our research more penetrative by reaching the depth of the matter which involves actual reading of the novels.
- b) **Library Research:** This involves reading articles pertaining to trauma literature including Post-Colonial, war fictions, point of view of Trauma Theory, elements of trauma Fictions, 'twice felt' trauma experienced by black in America, background information pertaining to confrontation between black and white etc.

TECHNIQUES OF DATA ANALYSIS

The research paper is Descriptive and Qualitative. The 'Trauma Theory 'is elucidated through the portrayal of characters, mind style and their attempts to recover from it through sharing, seeking 'comfort zone' etc.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before delving deep into 'trauma, trauma everywhere' in Afro- American fiction, one had better try to get into theoretical expounding of Trauma Theory, its tenets, healing of trauma, mind style when portraying traumatised characters. The term *Trauma Theory* in literature refers to a work of literature that portrays profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. The very field of *Trauma Studies* in literary criticism gained significant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's 'Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History ' and Kali Tat's 'Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma '. These Psychoanalytic theories on trauma are often paired with additional theoretical frameworks such as Post- structural, Socio- cultural and Post-Colonial theory. They form the basis of Criticism that interprets representations of an extreme experience and its effects upon identity

and memory. Since literature mirrors all landscape of the surrounding world, literary artists, too, have not failed to capture this mental landscape in their respective output. As a result, this trauma is getting reflected through various stylistic devices such as intertextuality, repetition, fragmentation, language manipulation to create meaning due to extreme traumatic stress.

Trauma was at the heart of Sandor Ferenczi's Clinical concerns. Towards the end of his life, he became convinced that trauma was an important cause of much neurotic and character pathology, despite the fact that traumatic factors were generally neglected by other analysts. The five guiding Principles of Trauma foreshadowed by him are Safety, choice, collaboration, trustworthiness and empowerment. Ensuring that the Physical and emotional safety of an individual is addressed is the first important step to providing Trauma- Informed care for him.

Trauma Reflected in Afro- American Literature: Inner turmoil getting manifested in Afro- American literature is largely a result of their confrontation with the white World. Why should there be any confrontation? Most of the critics do deplore the fact that even though the American black lived in America for over three centuries in the midst of white culture with its social, political and racial discriminations, he was always an alien within that Culture and lived a life of indignity, shame and torment. There has not been much significant change even in this twenty first century in the era of emancipation and glocalisation. And the sorry state is that the confrontation is still on in the country from where the notion of independence got firstly propagated. From the very beginning, the blacks in America got treated as 'toilers' by the superior and prosperous white. The first of these 'toilers' were brought as slaves from Africa, without their choice. In this new land called America, they were segregated and humiliated as "the dark- skinned aliens ".¹ They had been deprived of everything. What added their misery was 'slavery' and ' colour - caste', " two white institutions that flourished and successfully collaborated with each other for a definite design and which played a major role in destroying the lives of black Americans and in profaning every claim of justice and equality that American democracy had always hailed."² Contemporary black writers have not failed to reflect this in their literary output. The current research paper hinges round *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison.

For thematic convenience, one had better commence with *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison, the story of an internal quest- a journey of the soul that the protagonist has been pursuing. However, his primary search is for a name- or for the self since the opening of the novel reveals that he is nameless when he introduces:

I was an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I of your Hollywood movie ectoplasm. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids- and I might even be said to possess a mind.

(Prologue: 3): He mentions himself as an Invisible man but not by any name. Then it is obvious that his major quest will be for his name, identity and to win a place of recognition in the white world so that the people will be coming to approach him and he will be spared from the humiliation and their negligence. However, to pursue that goal, the narrator does play a great deal. He passes through a series of ordeals or trials to demonstrate his stature. But still does not give up his struggle since he had vowed that all past 'hibernation', all past ' invisibility ' must now end. First, he passes through the initiation- rites of the white society- the battle Royal, a brawl in which a group of blind- folded black boys fight for the entertainment of white and speechmaking that sends him to College and he is tormented into the adult

world. He passes that test by demonstrating his servility and naively interpreting his Grandfather's dictum:

"Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swollen you till they vomit and bust wide open" (Ellison:1211)

When he arrives at college, he is confronted by the deceit and duplicity of Negroes who have capitulated to a white World. He is broken by the powerful by the powerful coalition of Bledsoe the Negro President and Norton the white Trustee. His second trial shows him that the struggle is not a simple one of black against white, that they are more of complex than his first experiences showed. He finds that both black and white can be turned against him. The second phase of his career commences with his trip to New York, an exile from 'paradise'. In the city, he finds Bledsoe's seven magic passports to success in the white World, the letters of recommendations are actually betrayals, variations of the dream-letter: "Keep this Nigger-Boy Running." (1: 27) Thus his primary illusions are shattered but there are many more layers to the cocoon in which he sleeps for he is first of all a dreamer, a somnambulist, sleep and dreams figure significantly in his image of himself. As he reassessed himself, his metaphor, one finds his metaphor for new discoveries to be the same. In his own words, "It was as though I had been suddenly awakened from a deep sleep." (4: 84). Yet each sleep and each awakening (little deaths and births) prove to be interlocked layers of his existence, a set of never-ending Chinese boxes. One climactic section of the novel details his second crucial awakening- the "descent into the underworld" which occurs in Chapter 10 and 11. Finally, like the hero of myth and rituals, this Invisible Man descends from life on the mortal plane into an underworld of death which was "the substance of the entire New York Section of the Novel."³ On arriving in the city, he recalls the plucked Robin of the old song and imagines himself the victim of a fantasy-letter: "My dear Mr. Emerson...The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death and keep him running" (3:59). Then he takes the job at Liberty Paints, keeping white paint white by adding drops of pure black under the ironic slogan, "If it's optic white, it's The Right White" (10: 177) which has been invented by a Negro, the ancient and malevolent Lucius Brockway. The protagonist hero becomes a machine within the machines and he finds that Brockway, an illiterate 'janitor' is the heart of the whole industry. In the boiler room, an inferno, he is betrayed again by a Negro and "killed" through his treachery. But the death is the ritual death of the hero's career- a death which leads to resurrection and a new identity.

After the explosion, he awakens in a hospital, where he is resurrected by white doctors using an electroshock machine. Chapter II opens up with a monstrous image of the demons of this underworld: "I was sitting in a cold, white rigid chair and a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye that glowed from the centre of his forehead" (Ibid). The doctors revive him to the accompaniment of fantastic effects- Beethoven motifs and a trumpet playing "The Holy City" and dreamlike dialogue from the surgeons:

I think I prefer surgery. And in this case especially with this, uh.background. I am not so sure that I don't believe in the effectiveness of Simple prayer. (11:181-182) The machine will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife...Ibid) Why not a castration, doctor? (Ibid)

Then, as he is revived, the doctors construct an heroic identity for him, recapitulating his existence as a Negro, starting with the first folk myth guides of the clever Negro- Buckeye the Rabbit and Brer Rabbit: "' Buckeye' when you were very young and hid yourself behind wide innocent eyes; ' Brer' when you were older" 111: 196). The electro therapy machine is an emblem of the mechanical society imprisoning the protagonist hero: "I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought,

the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free". (12: 199). This lesson of the resurrection is carried through the rest of the protagonist's journey.

After undergoing much of the trials and tribulations in the racist world, he destroys his old selves one by one as he searches for light, erasing his past- burning his high school diploma, a doll which is a bitter totem of Tod Clifton's demise, the name given by him by the Brotherhood, a poison- pen note, all the tokens of his identity. Then he dreams of castration and sees that the retreat has been his crucifixion- he has been cut off from the world of possibility: "Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a straight jacket, its definition is possibility. *Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos- ask Rinehart, he's a master of it- or imagination* " (*ibid*). Imagination in the end redeems the anti- hero and makes his flight from battle a victory for it for it gives the readers his story. In his tomb he is not dead but hibernating, preparing for a spring of the heart, a return which may be either death or resurrection:

There's stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring- I hope of spring. But don't let me trick you, there is a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of the as in the smell of me. (13: 209) The Easter of the Spirit may be the emergence of the new Man- no longer an anti- hero, invisible, nameless and dispossessed but a true hero.

Thus, one finds 'Invisible Man' ending on an optimistic note. The hero springs up in life to face the reality with a sense of new found vigour when he asserts "*a decision has been made. I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less Invisible without it...even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.*" (16: 339) One does not come across a stereotyped black who is MARGINAL, subordinate, meek, timid, subjected to white oppression. On the contrary, he rebels against the existing dichotomy though his aspirations do get shattered in this racist society and he had to get perished in that. But still no one can say that he was defeated since he determines to continue his quest for he had understood the importance of freedom not as a matter of right or necessity "but as an endless possibility to many things that can happen."⁴ He realises the need to live life constructively. So, he determines to be reborn from the ashes of deferred dream hoping in this chaotic world, there could be "infinite possibilities for improvisation and affirmation."⁵ He will be endeavouring to be accepted as a part of American society without discrimination. Thus Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* has been eminently successful in delineating the harsh experiences of people and with such bitterness "as no group has tended to sense it no more than the black Americans."⁶ But as regards to the presentation of trauma by women they were rather shadowy:

"The writers like Ellison created inauthentic females because in their writings the black women are always subordinate to men and the relationship between black men and women is always exploitative. Women are not fully developed human beings and are treated as victims or sex objects and the relationship is never mutually beneficial. The women always remain on the fringe while men are busy struggling for their identity and achieving their manhood in the race conscious American society." ⁷ (Lerner,1972)

Thanks to the Second World War that women came out from the traditional role of 'acquiescence to subjugation', 'birth machines', even to be a 'bed partner's in order to gratify 'his' sexual lust. They learnt from their wartime experiences that they could do 'man's' work. In other words, they understood that there was nothing natural in the gendering of labour. This 'awakened' psyche regarding the objectification of women, the silencing of their voices and their psychological and physical abuse did not fail to appear in the literature of contemporary female writers including Afro- American

tinged with double Consciousness as being born 'black' and 'women', so expressing explicitly the need for self-expression because 'black women have no vagina', the fact conveniently obliterated by white, dominant group of feminists and as a result, "they have a different historical experience from that of the dominant group." (12-13). Still, like white feminists, they, too, "considered patriarchy to be the chief force behind woman's oppression. However, they widened the definition by adding racial and economic oppression, "playing their part in constructing Patriarchal power".⁹(Ibid). *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston deserves a special mention here in making drastic inroads into American Trauma literature. The novel is Janie Crawford's life story as she tells to her friend Phoebe Watson. As she talks, Janie is encouraged by "Phoebe's hungry listening" to shape and interpret her experiences. Her conscious life began, she decides on a spring afternoon in West Florida when a boy tried to kiss her over her grandmother's gatepost. This evidence of Janie's awakening sexuality alarms her Grandmother, a former slave, who believes, "De Nigger woman is de mule uh de World" (1:8).

"Ah been prayin' fun it huh be different wide you", (Ibid) Nanny Crawford tells Janie. Nanny's vision of what that difference would mean, however, is limited. She wants Janie to be the respectable wife of a man with property and so she marries her off to a middle-aged farmer, Logan Killicks. Although Nanny assumes that this marriage will prevent men from treating Janie as a 'spit cop's', it does not. Killicks himself looks down on Janie and tries to make her work as his servant, chopping wood and shoveling manure. She defies him and runs off with Joe Starks, a handsome man whose ambitious visions represent escape to her. Starks takes Janie to the new black town of Eatonville and establishes himself as the most influential man there by buying acreage and building a general store. Like Nanny and Killicks, Starks expects Janie to play a role in his story: She is to preside over his story yet hold herself aloof from the customers; to bind her beautiful hair in a head rag so that the men she waits on can not admire it; to remain silent while the unofficial club of men who gather on the store's porch spin tall tales. As Starks's wife, Janie gains the security and respect Nanny had prized yet discovers that it does not fulfill her. In fact, when Starks's death forces Janie to decide what she herself wants from life, she discovers that she hates the limitations Nanny imposed on self-fulfillment:

"Nanny had taken the biggest thing God had ever made, the horizon...and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to check her." (3:21)

It is in rejecting her Grandmother's conservative view of security that Janie finds her happiness. She falls in love with a younger man, Vergible (Tea Cake) Woods and goes to work side by side with him as a migrant farmhand. Despite doubts and jealousies, their relationship is strong, the passionate interaction of two strong individuals. Since the ways of destiny are unfathomable, a hurricane floods the area: Janie and Tea Cake barely escape with their lives. Indeed, in protecting Janie, Tea Cake is bitten by a dog that turns out to have been rabid. In a scene of progressive horror, he becomes jealous, enraged and increasingly aggressive, first biting her, then shooting at her. Janie saved her own life by killing Tea Cake. Although she is tried for murder, she is acquitted by an all-white jury and returns, weary but satisfied, to live with her thoughts and to tell her story.

On the whole, one finds Janie Crawford to be a very unusual heroine. Unlike most sensual women in literature, she is neither condemned to a tragic end nor punished by her creator. Instead, her desire for fulfillment is validated and rewarded. At forty, she is satisfied with her life. She has followed her own course, rejecting security in favor of passion and adventure. Tony Morrison's *'The Bluest Eye'* (1970) goes one step ahead in bringing out the trauma of a girl Pecola Breedlove who is the victim not just of colour fixation but also of love, totally a missing element in her life. Pecola, in her childish innocence, really believes that the world would be better if viewed through the blue eyes so highly valued according to the white standard of beauty. Pecola has been made to feel ugly because she is black. Her quest for blue eyes is symbolic of her quest for the attention and love that she has missed during her bleak

childhood. A pathetic figure, abused by her parents, denied by other adults and the target of vicious attacks from other children, Pecola believes that acquiring blue eyes will lessen her loneliness and cause others to see her in an entirely new and more appreciative light. At the novel's close, she has been raped by her own father Cholly, driven into madness and into a quest for "the bluest eyes": "He (Cholly), at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelope her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover." (12: 189) If ideas of Physical beauty are destructive, so are ideas of romantic love. Once Pecola starts to menstruate, she knows that physically she is ready to have a child but her friend Frieda tells her that first she must get someone to love her. Pecola's tragedy is that she does not know how to do that. She is aware of the choking sounds and Silence of her parents' love making and the commercial sex of the three prostitutes who live upstairs but her father's attempt to show his love for her gives her a painful initiation into sex as devastating as his own was. In trying to Express his love for her, Cholly destroys her.

LIMITATIONS

The research paper has confined itself only to three Afro- American Fictions based on trauma in the wake of Ethnocentrism, colour and gender discounting, even when there are turmoil in the wake of domestic abuse, war, acid attacks, unemployment issues, diaspora, etc. since trauma is all pervasive, all pervading.

CONCLUSION

A potent of 'human' experience comes down to us after the reading of these three novels. All three novels bring home the realization that trauma can be 'healed' if there is determination to get over it by fighting against 'hostile' circumstances. Ellison's nameless hero, Janie Crawford do not take injustice to be the ultimate fact of life but wield weapons against it and rise like a Phoenix from the ashes of their frustrated dreams. At times the dues are deferred to them. Pecola suffers in the unequal world of blacks which is totally a world of injustice and oppression as American society is still in the process of becoming plus more *Feminism is all about fairness*. But in their attempt to foreshadow the turmoil experienced by marginalized Section, all are becoming vocal on global platform, joining the squad of other literary activists like George Sand in France to Alfonsina Storni in Argentina and from Virginia Woolf in England to Forugh Farokhzad in Iran, who have described themselves as 'caged birds', capable of soaring if given the freedom to do so and showing clearly in their writing ability to do so. So the real success by these three trauma novelists lies in "detailing irrefutable indictments of white America and demonstrating the one sort of real power...wielded with responsible and challenging vigor and craft."¹⁰

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