

Narrating Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*

Gol Man Gurung

Saraswati Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University

Abstract

This article aims to analyse the trauma faced by the main character Amabelle Desir in Edwidge Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones*. It also takes into account the trauma faced by other characters in the novel. It explores their psychological trauma and its causes. The trauma is caused by the disappearance of her parents as well as her lover Sebastian. The shock of this loss overwhelms her and causes a deep wound on her heart. Her trauma is what exemplifies the suffering of many Haitians that has come as a result of ethnic cleansing practised by the despot Trujillo. Set in the 1930s Dominican Republic, the novel highlights the pain and torture experienced by the Haitians workingclass people in the cane plantations of the Republic and the torture and mass killings carried out by the despot. How Amabelle is traumatized and how she tries to give an expression to that trauma is the main focus of this research paper. The paper analyses the issue in the light of theoretical insights taken from Cathy Caruth and Dominick La Capra.

Keywords: acting out, massacre, narrativization, trauma, working through.

Introduction

The novel *The Farming of Bones* is the story of a young Haitian girl named Amabelle Desir. She is rendered as a victim of trauma from her childhood as she witnessed the accidental drowning of her parents in the massacre river which separates northern Haiti from Dominican Republic. Rescued by Ignacio, Amabelle is forced to be his housemaid for survival. The novel focuses on the pathetic condition of Haitian black people with Amabelle at the centre. They are beaten and tortured for not pronouncing the Dominican native language correctly. The book mirrors Amabelle's traumatized body and the mind. The Haitian immigrants were traumatized in the Dominican Republic. They were subjugated and dehumanized during the massacre of 1937. The common impoverished Haitians were victimized by the Dominican president, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. It was the outcome of blind nationalism. The protagonist of the novel, Amabelle represents the voice of the Haitian people who suffered a lot and were oppressed badly during the reign of the cruel dictator. She is caught in between two countries. As she tells her story of torture and suffering it helps her to assuage her pain and trauma.

Textual Analysis

The Farming of Bones deals with the embodiment of pain and torture, dream and reality of an individual who experiences the complexities of her traumatic experience in 1930 Dominican Republic. The novel focuses on the lonely life, suffering and devastation of the sugarcane workers. It is about the massacre of the Haitians in the Dominican Republic in 1937. Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart observe that ". . . They often can tell the story of traumatization with a mixture of past and present, but their current life is characterized by doubt and humiliation,

by feelings of guilt and shame: past meaning schemes determine the interpretation of the present” (178).

This observation implies that the power of past experiences overwhelms a person at the present moment. The memories bring a sense of deep pain as it weighs itself in the present. When the characters have such experiences, they tell stories to relieve themselves of the burden of trauma which is supported by Francis Forgyson’s idea that “The dialogic structure of Danticat’s narrative is closely intertwined with the performance oriented, storytelling of her narrative” (160). When Amabelle witnessed the drowning of her parents it brought a great shock with it and had an indelible mark on the mind and heart of the protagonist. The death of her parents can be regarded as her primary trauma. They drowned while crossing the Massacre river to move into Haiti.

Amabelle’s memory of what she had seen is constantly with her. The experience will always be with her to pain and overwhelm her as she reacts “... The water rises above my father’s head. My mother releases his neck, the current carrying her beyond his reach. Separated, they are less of an obstacle for the cresting river I scream until I can taste blood in my throat, until I can no longer hear my own voice” (20). As the above quote makes clear that trauma is something that haunts a person with a memory from the past and the present becomes highly unbearable and heavy. The victim loses all sense of the reality around her because she is engulfed by that powerful memory from the past. It is only by sharing it with other people that the victim can experience a sense of relief from the traumatic pain. In this connection Dominic La Capra maintains:

Victims of trauma tend to relive occurrences or at least intrude on their present existence, for example in nightmares or in flashbacks or in words that are compulsively repeated and that doesn’t seem to have their ordinary meaning because they are talking on different connotations from another belief . . . I also believe that people who have been severely traumatized, it may be impossible to fully transcend acting out the past. (143)

La Capra’s concept discloses the reality of traumatic experience in which the victim tries to relieve the event or memory of the past in many ways. Nightmares, flashbacks and use of certain kind of language by the victim shows that it is almost impossible to avoid acting out the trauma inflicted by past memories. It is by telling the story of those memories that victims try to find a way out of that obsessive psychology.

Amabelle’s position as a traumatized and wounded survivor provides much of the novel’s emotional and dramatic power. Being a narrator, she plays the role of mouthpiece for the suffering Haitians. Her experience symbolizes the rootless and stateless condition of Haitians. The following observation by Sebastian makes their situation clear:

Sometimes the people in the fields, when they are tired and angry, they say we are an orphaned people . . . we are the burnt curd at the bottom of the pot. They say some people don’t belong anywhere and that’s us. I say we are a group of people Vwayaje,

wayfarers. This is why you had to travel this far to meet me, because that is what we are. (22)

Here the cause of trauma is very obvious. The Haitian people living in the Dominican Republic are treated as aliens and this causes them to suffer from a sense of rootlessness. This terrible sense of dislocation and a lack of sense of belongingness tortures them and they feel highly traumatized. For these people, the only way to relieve the traumatic pain is either to go back to Haiti or to tell the stories of their suffering and lessen the emotional burden caused by those traumatic experiences.

A leading scholar of trauma theory, Cathy Caruth, in her *Unclaimed Experience* argues that, “Trauma is not located in the simple violence or an original event in an individual’s past but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature the way it was precisely not known in the first instance returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Thus, for Caruth trauma is not in the violence or the violent event but in the survivor’s response to that event. A survivor may not be able to make any sense of the event as it happens but relieves the memory of that event later on. This establishes trauma as a belated response to something that had taken place in the past. Not the simple violence but the disruptive effects of that event on the survivors is what reveals the true force of traumatic memory. Amabelle is frequently haunted by the memory of her parents and it causes a kind of great restlessness and a deep emotional turmoil. Her memory brings this fact to light,

In my sleep, I see my mother rising like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her . . . I was saving my smile for when you needed it . . . you were never truly dying, my precious imbecile . . . I will never be a whole woman . . . for the absence of your face. Your mother was never as far from you as you supposed. (79)

This is the outcome of Amabelle’s psychologically traumatized mind in the absence of her mother. Though her parents were separated from her they are inextricably rooted in her heart and memories. Therefore, the novel highlights the significance of reminiscence in the construction of psychological trauma.

For Cathleen Miriam, “A traumatic event is an event which threatens injury, death or the physical body of a child or adolescent . . . trauma refers to both the experience of being harmed by an external agent as well as response to that experience” (13). Trauma’s physical as well as psychological injuries are caused by different events. These experiences damage the healthy and normal psychology of the victim. This relates well to the experience of the protagonist Amabelle and the other Haitians living under extreme conditions in the Dominican Republic.

Conclusion

Trauma is an experience that comes as a result of a person’s response to an event that happened in the past. Such memories of the past haunt the survivors from time to time in the present and create a kind of emotional disturbance. Amabelle and other Haitians suffer from a sense of rootlessness. The protagonist’s reminiscence of her parents overwhelms her and she tells her stories to come out of the pain caused by those traumatic experiences. Narrativization of

trauma helps the victims to get relieved to certain extent from the impact of trauma in his/her life.

References

- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and Possibility of History*. John Hopkins Up, 1996.
- Dandicat, Edwidge. *The Farming of Bones*. Penguin Books, 1998.
- Ferguson, Francis. *Diaspora and Fragmentation*. Norton, 2003.
- La Capra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma: A Reflection*. Routledge, 2003.
- Mirian, Kathleen. *Fallouts of Trauma*. Penguin, 2004.
- Van Der Kolk, Bessel and Onno Van Der Hart. "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed Cathy Caruth. John Hopkins University Press, 1995, Pp.. 15