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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Causes and Management in Ravi Thapaliya's *Echoes of Pain*

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Abstract

Morbid human instinct and revenge psychology can lead a person to torture others with massive pain often pushing their lives into post-traumatic stress disorder which, however, can be managed with careful medicinal treatment, family support and elimination of the causes of disorder itself. Based on library research, consulting relevant archived documents supportive for analyzing the novel, this study employs the theory of trauma particularly drawing upon Caruth, Capra, Fish, Albucher and Liberzon who elaborate multiple aspects of the theory including the creation and elimination of psychic disorder. The findings show how a police interrogator tortures the suspects and enjoys at their pain in guidance of his revenge psychology developed years back when he was a street boy. The successful treatment of disorder shows how properly caring and loving the patients instead of creating distance, bringing them under proper treatment instead of isolating them and setting the things in right order instead of overlooking the causes can bring its proper management, thereby bringing the patients' lives into right track and regular rhythm that anybody can implement for managing such disorders.

Keywords: Morbidity, revenge psychology, torture, traumatic experience, psychic disorder

Introduction

Ravi Thapaliya, a Nepali doctor by profession, has surfaced his literary talent through *Echoes of Pain*, an interesting novel he published in 2005 exploring morbid human instinct that seeks causing pain to others as a way to remain oneself at a relatively pain-free state. Although he has created Kafka-like backdrop analogous to *The Trial*, the novel ends surprisingly with a happy note after the grotesque and chaos forwarding a persuasive voice that reconciliation and peace becomes possible even after devastating and destructive conflicts and interactions between human beings.

It is quite interesting to see how a police interrogator takes an innocent school teacher to the interrogation cell and causes massive pain violently beating, scolding, piercing pins into finger nails and enjoys at his pain. It is more interesting to see the way the interrogator fools the judicial system and Human Rights by hiring a doctor, the one who forgets his professional duty and invests all his medical skills into the depth of torturing the suspects and creating massive pain. A doctor is supposed to treat the patients and mitigate their pain quite like the way a police officer is supposed to save people's lives from danger, threat and violence. But the same doctor turns out to be the interrogator as well as the victim at the hands of police interrogator. Like the school teacher, he too becomes meek and feeble, and undergoes the same post-traumatic stress disorder paving way for the novel a tragic end although with an abrupt ending Thapaliya interestingly goes for the reverse stressing on the management of the disorder itself. Relying on both the aspects of post-traumatic stress disorder, this study has attempted to see how the novel relates the morbid human instinct and revenge psychology in the creation of post-traumatic stress disorder, and how its management takes place. It has tried to bring in-depth analysis of the causes and management of post-traumatic stress disorder revolving particularly around the principal characters like Vivas, Agni, Bonza and some others.

Review of Literature

Despite having many years of publication by a Nepali writer writing in the English language, very few criticisms have been published on *Echoes of Pain* leaving many issues to be analyzed and interpreted in the days to come. Of course many readers might have gone through it and observed particularly the way the author, who is a medical doctor by profession, has mixed fictional world with the medical one. Yet there is no sufficient systematic analysis of various issues raised in the text.

One of the reasons for no availability of wide array of literatures on this novel may be similar to what Deepak Adhikari in an interview with the author states, "When I fished out a novel called *Echoes of Pain* from inside Sajha Prakashan's book stall at Bhrikutimandap, Exhibition Road, Kathmandu, it had already gathered few layers of dust" (1). Adhikari's comment can be a vantage point to glimpse on why the novel has not been interpreted and analyzed by many scholars hitherto.

The available comments and criticisms, no matter they are limited, have praised the literary talent of Thapaliya and significance of reading *Echoes of Pain*. Hemang Dixit at the Department of Medical Education at Kathmandu Medical College, for instance, has compared Thapaliya with a celebrated English author Richard Ostlere, a medical doctor whose writing career went so successfully with the pen name 'Richard Gordon' that he finally gave up his medical profession and wrote many books, films and novels. Interpreting this novel valuable similar to Gordon's book on Forensic Medicine entitled *The Final Witness*, Dixit goes on recommending the readers to read it as, "Another book which I have been recommending to many people is "*Echoes of Pain*". ... This book is set in Nepal... and deals with what a Nepali doctor may have gone through during those times" (884). Along with recommending the readers to go through the novel for its worth of replicating the experiences of a medical person during the time of conflict in Nepal,

Dixit too, almost similar to Deepak Adhikari, further says, “I have recommended this book to many but it too may be out of print now, its readership being limited in Nepal” (884). By this Dixit is indicating the possibility that the novel might be limited to the Nepali readers and printed no more editions.

Methodology

This study has been conducted by following what Carolyn Steedman calls ‘archival method’ referring to the research conducted based on consulting the wide array of materials available on physical library to the online sources (18) for the systematic analysis of the issue including the textual analysis of the novel in the light of the theory of trauma.

Trauma refers to the psychological and emotional response to the deeply distressing or disturbing events such as rape, accidents, torture, assault, scandals, catastrophic incidents, economic depression etcetera that particularly lasts for a long period. It can cause the victim to have disordered psyche often resulting into personality disorder, anger, paranoia, sleeplessness, suicidal attempt, irrationality, mood swings, odd rituals, frustration, hopelessness and many more. It, as Cathy Caruth in “Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma and the Possibility of History” defines, is “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (181). Dealing with such experiences, trauma studies came forth with a renewed interest in 1980s particularly when “the critical perspectives provided by poststructuralism and deconstruction were being accused of not paying sufficient attention to history, politics and ethics” (Craps 5). Referring to the study on reoccurrence of persistent and frightening thoughts and memories of the ordeals, American Psychiatric Association also codified the term ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD) that “reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control” (Caruth58). The growing interest on trauma can “certainly be mapped by reference to the publication of particular texts that have become seminal within the field” (Radstone 9) such as by the scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman and Dominick La Capra which led trauma studies to enter the door of Humanities in the early 1990s as one of the most relevant frameworks for literary analysis.

The act of setting things in right order in the self of the traumatized person can resolve the trauma despite the fact that it is really a complicated action. For the treatment of traumatic personality different trauma recovery centers could be found in medical practice. Talking in a similar context, La Capra avers, “The TRC also provided a forum for the voices often the suppressed, repressed or uneasily accompanied voices of certain victims who were being heard for the first time in the public sphere” (696). Capra believes such trauma recovery centers to manage trauma and establish livable human society. Such centers have been practicing different trauma therapies and treatments effectively.

Departure

As an in-depth analysis of the novel in the light of the theory of trauma centering on the way the major characters undergo post-traumatic stress disorder and the way they overcome it, this study has keenly observed both the causes and the elimination of PTSD. Besides adding a new dimension in the analysis of this text, it has attempted to link literary criticism with the practical aspects of medical science particularly the treatment of psychic disorder. As such, it has presented a careful observation on how beautifully the author has amalgamated fiction with fact by bringing together the imaginatively created story and the realistic dimensions of PTSD.

Formation and Elimination of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Fiction with Facts

Echoes of Pain beautifully blends various causes of post-traumatic stress disorder and different strategies undertaken for its treatment including the elimination of causal factors behind such psychic disorder itself. It foregrounds the revenge psychology at the background of the morbid human instinct that motivates to inject pain in others for accumulating the pleasure for oneself as a basic cause of PTSD. Besides extreme torture, the massive fear of similar tragic misfortunes as well as the possibility of being the victim of revenge results into psychic disorder and repetitive occurrence of hallucination causing more disturbances in the lives. However, by exploring how the devotional family care along with proper medical treatment and the changes of enmity into friendship could transform PTSD into normal life, it has shown the resolution of the disorder itself. The novel consists of Bonza, Agni and Vivas as its principal characters. Bonza is a police interrogator running an interrogation cell where the suspects are brought and interrogated. Agni is a doctor at Teaching Hospital but he happens to work for Bonza. Vivas is a music teacher in a private school in Kathmandu who is brought to Bonza's cell for interrogation. The unbearable pain of massive torture makes Vivas suffer from PTSD even after his release. Bonza also traps Agni and uses his medical skills for creating pain in the suspects in the name of interrogation since doing so he gets pleasure. The circumstances not solely shatter Agni's humanity, career and goodness but also make him mad, violent and criminal. Like Vivas, he too suffers from repetitive nightmares and psychic disorder until the final resolution comes along with the management of the disorder.

Revenge Psychology and Morbid Human Instinct

The novel is set at the background of the pro-democracy era when monarchy was ruling through Panchayat political system. The king was all in all and nobody was supposed to question the royal family. Armed forces were suppressing people's voices. Bonza represents the bi-product of that rule. He can take the suspect in the cell and torture in the name of interrogation. Although his cell is the part of police investigation, he is making it a site of taking revenge with the whole humanity. His parents died of cholera in a village when he was just two years old. Later on, he came to Kathmandu, became a street boy and suffered great pain that developed his anger towards the society as narrated by himself in the novel:

I was a street-child. You know, people call them *khaate*. ... We just roamed the Kathmandu streets scavenging for food. The summers were ok. ... But the

coldness of winter reached everywhere. It was hard. But with so many stray dogs around, we slept OK embracing them which gave us enough warmth to live through the nights. The municipality people played the villain. They poisoned the street dogs from time to time. They still do it. That's bloody cruel. (332)

As clarified by Bonza's statement, the experience of growing up as a street boy and receiving massive suffering developed his hatred towards people as villain, thereby setting up his mind to take revenge which he materialized as a police interrogator. He began to create pains in others and get pleasure as he further narrates, "In my case, it was to put others in physical or mental pain so that I could be in pleasure, Right?... I didn't bother to see if they were criminals or not. As long as I could hurt them, I would take them for interrogation. If I didn't have a case, I wouldn't sleep" (334). To search the suspects and enjoy torturing became his daily routine often fooling the judicial system and Human Rights by hiring Agni, a doctor and interpreting it an interrogation.

Bonza's desire for revenge further activated his morbid human instinct that pleased him to see pain in the suspects. He also made Agni interrogating and torturing Vivas by developing the sense of revenge in Angi saying that Vivas was the bank robber. Agni remembered that his wife lost her job in a bank when it was robbed. She was covered by a robber and was under the nozzle of his gun. Agni thought Vivas to be that robber and decided to take revenge. So, he created massive pain by injecting pins into Vivas's fingers, tortured by using the torture gadgets as well as giving electric currents, and beat violently as the narrator narrates in the novel, "Agni became morbidly fixated on Vivas. He wouldn't hesitate to do things like beating him up randomly, kicking him, and using the torture gadgets that Bonza had accumulated" (110). Massive beating and torture made two holes into Vivas's guts. Agni conducted the quick operation with the assistance of Bonza, Sirdar and other guards to save Vivas out of his desire to further torture and take revenge. He got more confidence in torturing thinking that he could go to any length of interrogation since he could save the patient.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vivas

Vivas was arrested when he was going to his school only because he muttered something when a police van nearly hit him. He was taken to local police station and then to Godavari police headquarter and finally to Bonza's cell. In the cell Bonza, Agni and other interrogators tortured him.

Disappearance of Vivas disappointed his wife Preetishma and relatives. She went into the depth of pain and suffering, left her office and lived a deserted life. She searched him everywhere in support of her maternal uncle. She visited police station, requested Human Rights, consulted *Sadhu Maharaj* and prayed the gods and goddesses. When Vivas was released on 17th of Jestha of 2046 her happiness knew no bounds although the problem increased due to his psychic disorder called post-traumatic stress disorder. He suffered from various features of PTSD in the line of Caruth's definition as stated in her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* as:

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive

hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (4) Similar to Caruth's definition, Vivas suffered from PTSD as evident in the nightmarish dreams, repeated thoughts and images of how pins were inserted into his fingers, sleeplessness, paranoia, feeling of insecurity, trembling hands, forgetfulness of the notations and tune of guitar, and excessively restlessness.

The disturbed mental condition of Vivas made him to mistrust his own wife and develop suspicion in her character. Feeling similarity in the eyebrows of his son and the doctor, he said, "Look, I've always had this thing in my mind. He looks like the doctor, doesn't he?...Everything else is fine...but tell me why he looks like the doctor? Is he the doctor's son?" (305). The suspicion that Preetishma might have developed extramarital relationship with the doctor, and Sarbon could be his son made her cracked. She decided to commit suicide as narrated in the novel, "Preetishma wanted to die. There was no point in living now. ...She washed her face and went out. She had a tough time buying Metacid. Just a quarter of bottle would be enough. But a full bottle would make it certain" (307). Vivas's madness due to the traumatic experience of the cell did not let him act, think and behave properly such as his blame on her character without any logical reasoning.

Preetishma, however, realized that her husband suspected her out of his post-traumatic stress disorder. Her uncle's complaint of feeling pain in his imputed leg also gave her a realization that she could feel pain and suffering even after her death just as her uncle did even though his leg was cut off. She felt that it would be more tragic if her 'I' remained there without body as she would be unable to do anything to her helpless husband and her son. She returned back from her decision.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Agni

Like Vivas, interrogation cell changed Agni's life too. He became a drunkard regularly going to *bhatti* for drinking, going home late and becoming reckless towards his spouse and daughter. Interrogation at Bonza's cell brought money home but what was earned was poverty in the kitchen. His earlier realization of 'money does the same thing no matter how it comes' as well as 'nobody believes in poor man's philosophy of simple living' turned out to be wrong. A huge turning point came in his small family and he became hysterical as well as mentally ill.

Bonza's decision of releasing Vivas developed the sense of fear in him. He feared that Vivas could take revenge. Thus, he wanted to keep Vivas in the cell for more days and said, "I don't think we should release him" (193). But Bonza did not accept it. Agni became more restless when he knew how Bonza fooled him about Vivas's involvement in bank robbery.

Agni felt that his wife Rita too was also against him since she had brought Preetishma home. He also blamed her for giving secret information to DD, a doctor in Nepal Government's Hospital and a leader in Nepal Medical Association and close friend of Agni as well. DD tried his best to take Agni out of Bonza's trap but Agni suspected the same gentle man. He also blamed DD for conspiring against him and suspected his

involvement in the decision of the council to deregister him. His increasing madness made his becoming violent at DD. He shared his problem with Bonza but it turned out to be conflict and fight. After being beaten by Bonza, he went to the Council, got his name deregistered, faxed the letter to the press and returned home as failure, weak, insane and terrified man.

The cell turned Agni's life a miserable being. He failed even to defend himself when the landlady's son called him criminal and threw all his belongings all over the yard ordering him to vacate the room. He found problem, insecurity and conspiracy everywhere, and developed fear, sleeplessness, paranoia and nightmares. All the events and incidents of the cell began constantly coming into his mind. Rita tried to make him sleep in her lap but he woke soon dreaming about Bonza, Sirdar, Vivas and many others skilled in the cell and the custody. Narrating such a pathetic condition of this doctor, the narrator avers:

Night came that day too. It brought with it more memories of the past. ...
Bonza and Vivas frightened him time to time. He didn't sleep deeply but he still dreamed. He saw them every time he dreamed. He was frightened that Vivas would recognize him outside. And those medical professionals were set to expose him. Then he would be safe nowhere. (208)

The excerpt gives a much clearer picture of how Agni's restlessness increased often waking at night in hallucinatory state listening the sound calling him 'doctor'. He suffered from his sleep, half-sleep, dream, sound of the dead and such other many things. He became the victim of post-traumatic stress disorder just as his victim Vivas Thapa.

Actually, trauma narratives tend to show a particular set of stylistic features which replicate the fragmented psyche of the characters. Anne Whitehead states that "novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection" (3). Whitehead believes on representing the traumatic reality by mimicking the forms and symptoms of the trauma itself. So, she believes that "if trauma fiction is effective, it cannot avoid registering the shocking and inassimilable nature of its subject matter in formal terms" (83). She also argues that the effective trauma narrative have the characteristic features intertextuality, repetition [at the levels of language, imagery or plot] and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice. *Echoes of Pain* consists of such features in terms of nightmarish dreams, flashbacks, repetitions, and intrusive memories, thereby giving the proof that Thapaliya drew his principal characters like Vivas and Agni as the victims of a traumatized psychological condition.

Agni was disturbed in terms of every aspect of life. The image of the cell, fear of Bonza and Vivas and deregistration gave him unbearable torture. He was ruined without any means of living and thus wept, cried almost as a child and as a mad man. He dreamed about torturing DD in the cell, DD's death, Bonza asking him to certify DD's death due to cholera, signing many certificates without any name and many more things.

Rita shifted her family in a rented room in Khokna assuming Agni to be normal but in vain. Instead he developed hallucination and felt Bonza and Vivas torturing him. Although it was his illusion, he perceived the things as real quite like what William

Fish in the book *Perception, Hallucination, and Illusion* states, “In hallucination, we are in a state that seems to us just like a veridical perception of a worldly fact or facts, yet in which there are no suitable facts for the hallucinatory state to acquaint us with” (Fish 80). Agni’s hallucination led him buying a knife to defend himself from Vivas, Bonza and Sirdar. Carrying the knife, he tried to go out. When Rita attempted to stop him, he stabbed her and said, “Ritu, I hope I’m your last disaster. Last pain” (296). Rita was stabbed time and again by her own husband for whom she did everything being devotional.

Setting the Things into Right Order: Management of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

The scholars of trauma theory argue that setting the things into right order can resolve PTSD. They argue for different trauma therapy to heal the patients from emotional and psychological trauma and make them learn to feel safe again. Thapaliya experimentsthe same thing on his fictional characters Vivas and Agni regarding the management of the post-traumatic stress disorder with positive results and conclusion.

Besides taking proper care with spouse’s love, Preetishma took her husband to the hospital for treatment under the supervision of Dr. Thapa. The medicinal treatment and doctor’s counseling brought Vivas in normal condition that justifies the success of curing PTSD with medication often reiterating what Ronald C. Albucher and Israel Liberzon at the University of Michigan in a paper “Psychopharmacological Treatment in PTSD: A Critical Review” state, “Numerous medications are effective in treating PTSD. These include tricyclic antidepressants, monoamine oxidase inhibitors, and serotonin reuptake inhibitors” (355). The proper treatment brought Vivas to be able to join his school, earn money by writing articles and help his family members conduct their regular task.

Like Vivas, Agni too went hospital for treatment under the supervision of Dr. Thapa with great success. Despite being stabbed, Rita too survived and poured her love for Agni’s treatment. They got normal life. There was another important thing behind the proper cure of Vivas and Agni. Vivas forgave Agni and Bonza. Forgiveness does have a great value in human life. Steen Halling aptly said, “Forgiving another and forgiving oneself are both experiences that bring relief and a sense of a new beginning in life” (107). Going ahead in the line of Halling’s argument, Vivas developed friendship with Agni that mitigated their pain, brought relief and slowly redeemed from PTSD. Preetishma and Rita had already become close friends. Their friendship resulted into family gathering. Comfortable relationship got developed between two families wiping out the state of paranoia.

To set the things into right order, it was essential to make good relationship with Bonza. Agni inquired about Bonza and found Bonza as Bodh Ram. His interrogation cell had already been turned into local government office. Agni and Vivas went to his house in Sallaghari and found Bodh Ram as old, weak, simple and greatly changed like his name. He was no more awesome with the realization that an echo of pain is also a pain but not pleasure. He happily welcomed Vivas and Agni who had already forgiven him. Accepting his friendly relation and invitation for dinner, they took their families for dinner and curiously listened his narration about his life and profession. Being able to tell his stories

to Vivas and Agni, he felt satisfied while they too became happy to know how he had become social often giving all his property to a social organization. More than this, he had convinced Medical Council to reregister Agni. They felt light and fresh to be able to surpass the obstacles of their lives. Preetishma and Rita felt great relief to find their husbands normal and out of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Conclusion

By presenting the major characters in a trap of a police interrogator, who is guided by his revenge psychology massively torturing the suspects so as to get pleasure by seeing their pain, the novel exposes the morbid human instinct as a source of the traumatic experience. Dreadful experiences and the fear of uncertain future filled with the possibility of similar tragic happenings again and again result into post-traumatic stress disorder. Even after the end of torture and real event, the psychic disorder brings nightmarish experiences, hallucination, madness and depression. However, they overcome the tragedy and change the psychic disorder into a normal mental condition for a better life bringing everything to its regular tune. Unfathomable love of family members along with appropriate medical treatment mitigates the terror and depressive mindset. Elimination of the causes of disorder eliminates the disorder itself, thereby justifying how the management of post-traumatic stress disorder can take place surpassing the long period of nightmare and suffering. The people or the family undergoing similar circumstances could assimilate the practice and bring PTSD management in their lives.

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