

Traumatic impact of Tran Mong Tu in her poem “The Gift in Wartime”

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Abstract

This study surveyed the traumatic impacts of Tran Mong Tu in her poem, “The Gift in Wartime”. The poem is related to the Vietnam War (1954-1975) survivors and Tu’s trauma. As Tu’s husband’s death traumatized her and she expressed her frustration and tension in the poem, several other war victims were traumatized. Her trauma represented the Vietnam War survivors. This research attempted to find out the cathartic release of war veterans’ traumatic impacts. She behaved like an abnormal person. She offered her husband roses and tears on his grave. The findings of the study showed that one of the best therapies or cathartic release of traumatic impacts was to forget it, compromise it and purge it. Transformation and purgation are the best ways to release the trauma. The study focuses on realizing the fact and being satisfied by adjusting to the situation. Trauma has not been studied yet from this angle. Crying might be the most common ways of outlet of cathartic release. Releasing the trauma depends on the individual’s tackling and compromise. Writing is the best way of releasing the trauma although listening to music also lessens it. Tu attempted to release her traumatic pain through her poems. She suffered psychologically from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This study employed the trauma theory to analyze the poem.

Keywords:- cathartic release, past memory, PTSD, traumatic impact, war survivors

Introduction

The study surveyed and examined the traumatic impact of Tran Mong Tu, one of the live war survivors of Vietnam War (1954-1975). She composed poems about her painful experiences of war. She composed this poem “The Gift in Wartime”, when her husband died in war as he was a warrior. This poem is about her husband’s untimely death and it is a mourning poem or elegiac poem. She has psychic pain from this tragedy. She is mentally disturbed. She attempted to release her trauma through the write-up, so that she would feel light by sharing her pains with the readers. There are several examples of releasing traumatic impacts through writing. In a sense, writing is healing of the trauma. “Healing depends upon gaining control over that which has engulfed us” (Borrowman 9). Healing here means releasing trauma and if a trauma survivor can gain control over it, s/

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he will be able to come out of the vault of trauma. One of them is Joan Didion's essay, "In Bed", which is about her migraine headache. She attempted to release her migraine headache through her write-up, and she released it. She was worried about her life career but because of her strong willpower she did not lag behind though she was a migraine patient. She thought that she was unable to do as much as other people but she succeeded in her life in the same way as the healthy persons did. Didion shared her live experiences of painful migraine with the readers. She was used to spending one or two days a week in bed almost unconscious with a fire drilling pain through her head. The readers must have felt her pains throughout this essay. Therefore, the research found that the traumatic impacts of the sufferers could be released through transformation and purgation.

Tu has released her mental tension through her poems. She composed another poem "War Is a Terrible Thing" with a similar intention. She considered the war as a destructive thing. Both of these poems are representative evidences of the traumatic impacts of all war veterans of the Vietnam War. There are several ways of cathartic release of trauma. Crying is another great catharsis of releasing the traumatic impacts. But writing might be a more long lasting therapy or transformation or catharsis. It is a healing of the trauma. "In writing or not writing during the immediate aftermath of national trauma, and in the weeks and months following, students who choose to write about the event can express personal reactions—can *write trauma*, in other words" (Goggin and Goggin 45). During the aftermath of national trauma, the students can write about the trauma rather than anything else, and they expressed their trauma through writing. Writing about trauma means remembering, and remembering means forgetting. Similarly, forgetting means compromising and transforming. Not only, writing, but also speaking. After the war, all the war veterans talk about the war and its effects with other people. War becomes a major subject of talk. If a person tells the trauma or writes it for so many times, it will get released. For instance, LaCapra argues, "I have argued elsewhere that mourning might be seen as a form of working-through, and melancholia as a form of acting-out" (65). The sufferers mourn when the trauma starts suppressing them. And sometimes they do the acting like they are not sufferers. This also helped release their traumatic impacts. Tu's write up is about mourning and lamenting. So, writing is transforming, releasing the trauma and realizing the situation. There has not been any research from this angle.

Another scholar, Dessler opines that trauma can be managed in different ways. She "suggests that the goal of interpretation, analysis, and argumentation is to make the "seemingly incomprehensible" safe for consumption by transforming it into material that is manageable, orderly, civilized, and palatable, ignoring trauma's inevitable inability" (86). She means to suggest that releasing trauma is managing it by ignoring and transforming it into material through trauma has an inevitable inability. She "further complicates the rhetorical situation of teaching writing in times of shared trauma through a localized, situated analysis of both the present and the past. She argues that often the drive to reframe

and reinterpret ongoing trauma falls into a trap” (Borrowman 6). So, writing is sharing the pains with others. Then the trauma falls into a trap or a vault. The trauma disappears later on when the sufferers express it through writing. Similarly, Tu has also expressed her trauma through her poems.

The study explored this research paper with the ways of transforming the traumatic impacts into the material and forgetting them anyhow. Traumatic impacts have not only the pains, they have some gains, too. Or the sacrifice of Tu’s husband’s death for the nation building is a great tribute that cannot be ignored. The advantageous aspect of trauma has not been explored yet. Most researchers analyze trauma as negative things. Trauma has a long-term effect that is psychologically rooted. But the traumatized persons are mentally much stronger than the non-traumatized persons. They can face even severe mishaps because they are used to experiencing them. The survivors of trauma “are stronger than the average person” (Sciortino 32). They have experienced the war lively, and they have an idea of how to manage the mishaps and hardships. So are the Vietnamese. Vietnam has developed a great deal now all because they were traumatized. Japan was also badly traumatized after the destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima but the Japanese developed those cities in such a way that no one recognizes them now. This creation has been possible because of destruction. Therefore, this paper might be the first one which advocates trauma as creative and productive.

Needless to say that it is difficult to fathom the traumatic impact on the person. Most people get badly disturbed when they are traumatized. So, some survivors of trauma, who are badly injured and cannot survive by themselves because of physical disability, and no family members to support him/her, might attempt to commit suicide to get free from over stress of the traumatic pains. No one is free from trauma. Except the death of loved ones, there are other reasons for trauma. Howard and Crandall claim:

One in two people will be exposed to a life-threatening, traumatic event in their lifetime. It can be the death of a loved one; it can be war; robbery, rape; it can be the loss of a job. Usually the person recovers after some time, and the trauma fades to a memory - painful destructive. Trauma, however, is not the same as the mental PTSD - Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Now and then, the body cannot quite heal the trauma, and there are long-term changes in the trauma is severe, prolonged, or life threatening, the after effects years. (1)

The war survivors have lost their either father or husband or brother or love partner in war, and they have seen the blood live which they cannot forget easily. They try their best to be free from such painful memories of war that are suppressed in the mind. It is not only the war, the cause of trauma is rape, robbery as well as loss of job or so. Whatever the loss a person faces, there is a good way out by forgetting it or compromising with the situation. Then the trauma gets faded away into a memory. Healing the trauma is the most

challenging job but transforming and taking it as a positive thing help the sufferers. Tu released her trauma through poems. Only writing is not the outlet of trauma, compromising with the situation is the final outlet. The main purpose of the study is how to release trauma. The traumatized person can compromise as “the story of the real trauma is replaced by the story of the ideal event” (Caruth, *Empirical* 29) that is to be created. Similar type of dead event of some high figure can be presented in front of sufferer and s/he can understand that his/her loved’s death can become simpler. Tu’s husband’s death is a great sacrifice for nation building, and there many more soldiers died in the war.

The grip of trauma is so strong that it does not easily free a person because “trauma renders experience inaccessible to conscious thought through the failed psychic integration of that experience: the experience cannot be assimilated into the broader cognitive patterns that are central to memory” (Barnaby 119). The trauma sticks in the central part of a sufferer’s mind in such a way that one cannot imagine. And the prey cannot easily assimilate with it. So, the mental health of war veterans cannot be good. Tu is not free from her traumatic pain as she lost her loved one and she is offering him roses as if he is standing in front of her. Other war survivors may behave like mad person. This is what Tu is doing in the poem.

One of the major concerns of this paper is taking the traumatic impacts as a creative thing rather than just the worry and psychological disturbance. Considering the trauma as creative and productive is one of the best ways of releasing the trauma. This aspect of trauma has not been analyzed yet. Tu has also to implement this technique for releasing her trauma. It is not only Tu’s loved husband who died in the war, Hendrix and Anelli pointed out that “nearly 500,000 Vietnam veterans currently have PTSD and that nearly 1.7 million will exhibit clinically significant stress reactions at some time during their lives” (87). PTSD is deeply rooted in the minds of all the war survivors. Suppose a person has lost all his/her family members either in war or in an earthquake or a flood. There is no one to help him or her. Now, s/he generates the idea to lead his/her life ahead if s/he is not injured or his/her injuries are not dangerous, and s/he learns to tackle and deal with the hardships and difficulties of life. In this way, the survivors of trauma are mentally stronger than the average person. Or Tu is much stronger than any other average person. The survivors of trauma have faced a lot of deaths of their own family members as well as their friends, lovers, beloved, relatives and other humans. They must have been depressed seeing such painful incidents, but they manage it anyhow. “In the spring of 1970 when the national trauma was war in Vietnam and on American campuses” (Elder 157), the war veterans suffered much. Tu’s poem is the representative of the trauma of all the Vietnamese. It is a challenging task to manage the trauma. The trauma survivors are much more courageous than that of average persons. The main purpose of the study was how to have the cathartic release of traumatic impacts on the war survivors. The study found that the destruction is for construction. Whatever the destruction takes place though losses are heavy, positive thinking is the best medicine for trauma.

For the analysis of Tu's traumatic impacts, the study applied the theoretical tools developed by Freud, Felmen and Caruth. They are the fathers and founders of trauma theory. Trauma is a long term psychological effect of different mishaps like war, accidents, natural calamities etcetera. All these factors have a long term effect on the sufferers that are deeply rooted in their minds. Therefore, trauma theory as well as the psychoanalysis approach are the major tools for the analysis and interpretation of Tu's poem. Most people try their best to manage the traumatic impacts but everyone cannot easily manage or release them. So, some people take drugs and alcohol but some can manage or forget them after a certain period.

The traumatic impacts are repressed in human minds. They cannot be easily settled. The trauma haunts the sufferers as soon as they come close to such a situation, time or place. Not only the place, but also the music, song, festival, party, and some objects that remind of past incidents and make the sufferers unhappy or push them to that state of negative nostalgia. For instance, the accident survivors immediately remember the catastrophic events as soon as they come to the place where they had met a deadly accident. Meek states, "Caruth and Felman theorize traumatic memories and symptoms as literal traces or physical embodiments of the historical real." (p. 19). The traumatic memories are the literal traces and the historical real that cannot be ignored. The traumatic memories haunt the sufferers but they have to manage it. Furthermore, Caruth defines trauma:

In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena². The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century. (*Unclaimed* 11)

Caruth clarifies that trauma is an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events like war or war like destructions as earthquakes. In the meantime, when death occurs, the sufferers keep silent, express nothing, and remain idle. It is because s/he does not believe his/her eyes. It is a shock to him/her, it is not true or it is a dream. Later, when s/he realizes that it is not a dream, it is true, then s/he expresses his/her pains excessively through his/her tears. S/he cries so loudly. Later, they compromise with the situation because there is no alternative. Likewise, the soldiers who are the war survivors have the live experiences of sudden and massive death around them. They get numbed when they see this. The trauma becomes the repeated nightmares. The images of dead bodies recur in the sufferers' minds. Similarly, the image of Tu's husband's dead body hallucinates her, and she wants to release the trauma.

In addition, Radstone states that "memories are understood to be the unmediated, though unassimilable records of traumatic events. These memories are understood to

undergo 'dissociation', meaning that they come to occupy a specially designated area of the mind that precludes their retrieval" (p. 14). The traumatic impacts get stuck in the sufferer's mind permanently and it is difficult to manage for the victims. The mental pain of the sufferer does not get faded away easily.

Results and Discussions

This section deals with the traumatic impacts of Tu and her cathartic release from it. Trauma is not only because of war though war trauma is much more devastating and destructive in nature than other traumas. Many other factors generate trauma, like natural disasters and calamities, such as such as earthquakes, volcanoes, over-flood, drought, tsunamis and so on. Different conflicts, mass shootings, road accidents, rape, poverty, social suppression or domination, dehumanization, beating, cheating, betraying, bullying, belittling, demotion, boycotting, misbehaving, unsuccessful results in life or failure, discrimination and so on, are responsible for trauma. This is human nature that everyone wants to avoid the repetition of hurting experiences again in life. Similarly, once a person is badly victimized either by someone's misbehaving or scamming or cheating or lying, s/he becomes aware or cautious of this incident in advance.

But this paper focuses on the transformation and purgation of war trauma like that of Tu though there are other traumas. The study supports the ways of cathartic release of trauma through writing. In addition to this, it proposed other ways like compromising with the situation. Taking the trauma from a positive point of view is another best way to release trauma. There are millions of Tus, who are survivors of war in the countries where different civil wars, religious wars or world wars occurred and recurred. Tran Mong Tu has presented the traumatic impact of the Vietnam War (1954-1975) through the poem, "The Gift in Wartime". Tu has the live experience of the Vietnam War. In the poem, the speaker addresses a dead person as if he is there listening to her whatever she is saying. This poem is a conversation between a live person and a dead person. This is a literary fantasy. The live person is badly bereaved because her husband died in the war and she is offering him roses in the graveyard. She has a hallucination that he is still alive. This is a poet's imagination that the conversation between a live person and the dead person is possible. She thinks that he is listening to her from somewhere. She does not believe his death, so, she offered him roses. What a pathetic situation! Tu's poem can also be taken as her soliloquies. She feels that he is happy to receive the roses she offered. Many war victims have been in the same situation.

This poem proves that war is always destructive. The war does not destroy only the humans, it also destroys other things like physical infrastructures and so on. The poetess showed that in the Vietnam War, "loses were heavy, more than two million Vietnamese and 57000 Americans died" (Tu 253). In this sense, war is nothing more than the man-eating monster. Moreover, "An estimated 8,000 Viet Minh were killed in the siege and battle,

and another 15,000 troops were injured during the campaign. By comparison, only 2,200 French troops died in the clash (another 6,000 were wounded, and 10,000 were captured)” (Hillstrom and Hillstrom 34). The war kills not only the military people, but also kills the innocent public, animals, and plants or destroys the whole ecosphere and atmosphere or the natural environment. So, the war has impact on the environmental cost of war, too. But this paper does not highlight the impact of the environmental cost of war. The study is fully about how to have the cathartic release of traumatic impacts of the war veterans though there can be a doctoral dissertation on the impact of the environmental cost of war.

‘The Gift in Wartime’ is a poem about the traumatic impact of Tu herself. This represents the thousands of other war victims. The poetess creates the image of a young lady standing in front of a new grave in which her newly married dead husband is there. She is in a bereaved condition and she is murmuring something as if her husband is responding to her. She looks like a mad girl there as it reflects the real picture of wartime. Thousands of war victims have similar conditions. Tu is badly irritated with war. Millions were irritated with the war but it was beyond their control. “One feels anger, guilt, or shame whenever one is unable (refuses) to accept the necessity and unavoidability of what happened” (Krystal 87). Tu feels anger and guilt of maybe getting married with her husband, and she cannot accept the unavoidability of what happened. But if she was able to accept the situation she would manage her traumatic pain. The war was beyond her control. It was unavoidable. The war is waged in the interest of rulers or a limited number of people, but thousands of innocent people get victimized. This is what the war does. Tu expresses her inner pains through the lines of the poem:

I offer you roses

Buried in your new grave

I offer you my wedding gown

To cover your tomb still green with grass. (p. 254)

The speaker offers her husband the roses but he is in the grave and he does not know who is doing what for him. The speaker is bereaved because of her husband’s untimely death. Most young soldiers are involved in wars. The separation of husband and wife at young age moves the readers and they pity on Tu. The speaker is none than the wife of the dead husband, as she is not only offering the roses to him, she is also offering him her wedding gown. There is no context of the birth of a child from this couple. This indicates that they were still young or it had been a few years of their marriage but the monstrous war dismissed their life. The war has separated thousands of the couples.

The speaker says that her husband gave her medals with silver stars and they are still shining but the owner is no more in the physical world. This gave her more pain. She offered him her youth and she is still in love with him but her youth died. Her husband gave

her the smell of blood from his and his enemy's war dress which moved her. She offered him the tears (clouds) from her eyes as they flooded non-stop. She also offered him cold pains (winters) amid her springtime of life. She says that he is giving her his lips without a smile; arms without tenderness; eyes without sight because he is motionless. At last, the speaker agrees with the reality that she has nothing to do with the death. She just makes a promise to meet him again in their next life. She will be holding the shrapnel as a token by which they would recognize each other. This is also a kind of compromise. There is no guarantee of the next life but this is the way of releasing the trauma. Tu has already transformed herself into material that death is inevitable and her husband's sacrifice is for the nation building and it is a great tribute which every citizen cannot do it.

Conclusion

The study focuses on Tu's traumatic impacts and attempts to overcome them by having a cathartic release. This paper concluded that transforming and purging are the best ways to release trauma. The research and experiences have proved that trauma can be overcome through patience, writing, dreams, transformation, and ignoring the painful events although it is not an easy task. One of the best ways of releasing the traumatic impacts is compromising the present situation by taking it positively. Last but not least is positive thinking. If the war veterans think positively, their trauma will be no more trauma.

This paper analyzed Tu's poem using the theoretical tool of trauma theory developed by Freud, Felmen and Caruth. The poem explored Tu's pathetic condition when she lost her husband in Vietnam War. She offered roses to her husband in the graveyard giving the image of how war traumatized people in the world. She released her trauma through writing this poem as Joan Didion did writing her essay "In Bed". The findings of the study showed that war veterans have the cathartic release of their traumatic memories through transformation and purgation. Compromising with the situation was another way of releasing the traumas to overcome the pathetic condition of Tran Mong Tu like war veterans. This poem, "The Gift in Wartime" is just the representative of the painful situation of war impact upon the Vietnamese who eye witnessed the devastating war between America and Vietnam. It means it is not only Tu who lost her loved one, thousands of families lost their loved ones. She should look at others pathetic conditions, too. This also helps lessen the trauma because others trauma might be more serious than hers.

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