

An Exploration of Trauma in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract:

The paper is an attempt to unravel trauma aspects through theoretical analysis of the woman protagonist Nanda Kaul in Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain*. An effort has been made to understand the complex aftermath of experiencing psychological trauma with the help of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory presented in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History* (1999). To understand it in its true sense it is very important to cover the issues of society, culture, domesticity and psyche of the people as it can stem from a multitude of experiences like abuse, disasters, loss, and violence. Trauma theory suggests that trauma can be individual or collective. Therefore, the study makes an effort to investigate the socio-cultural restrictions and isolation suffered by the woman protagonist of the novel. The theory also suggests that trauma can lead to a variety of cognitive effects in individuals; memory problems is one of the vital effects seen among the traumatic experienced person(s) with difficulties in concentration and recall, individuals may also experience struggle with executive function in planning and decision making, attention disruption, executive dysfunction, and intrusive thoughts to traumatic event in their lives.

Keywords: Trauma, Women, Society, Psychology, Isolation

Introduction

Anita Desai is one of the prominent women novelists in Indian writing in English. She is known for her portrayal of contemporary women in the patriarchal social set up of India. Desai's novels explore the experiences of women in different socio-economic backgrounds. She represents the emotional and physical repression of contemporary Indian women. She is known for her novels like *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *In Custody* (1984), *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) etc, it portrays the intricacies and complexities of Indian society and the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. She also addresses human relationships, identity, feminine psyche, and family dynamics in her novels.

The word 'trauma' has its origin from the Greek word 'traumatizo', which means 'wound'. It surfaced for the first time in the year 1693. Initially, the word 'trauma' implied only to physical injuries, but gradually it explains a deeper connotation that goes to express psychological injuries. This concept of trauma which is both physical and internal is well described in Oxford Learner's Dictionary; it says that trauma can be referred a mental condition caused by severe shock, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time. Cathy Caruth in her work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History* (1996), put forward trauma as "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 appearance of hallucination and other uncontrolled phenomenon”(11). Caruth, in her Trauma Theory highly relies on Sigmund Freud’s notion of trauma which he presented in Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Moses and Monotheism. Caruth believes that these two works are significant in understanding human survival in the wake of trauma. She notes that the trauma causing event is so violent and sudden that it is not ‘fully known’ in the first place. Its impact is realized only after the event is long over and repeats itself in the form of nightmares and flashbacks. Caruth explores the representation of trauma and she believes that it is not so easy to articulate. Its effect is seen in ‘belatedness’, which suggest that its effect is not fully registered in victims consciousness but it registers only after the event is over.

Taking Caruth’s aspects of trauma theory an analysis of the select text is done to explore the literary representation. As Literature is a representation of our real society and trauma accounts in Indian English writings have been reflected in many texts based on various traumatic events. Trauma is found in literatures from Kashmir valley which witnessed the traumatic exodus to English Literature from Northeast where people have witnessed the turmoil against their land. Amidst all these traumatic experiences women writers like Anita Desai, Temsula Ao, Arupa Patangia Kalita and many more have successfully presented trauma suffered by the women characters in their works. Women’s traumatic experiences sometimes goes neglected over the broader issues of trauma related to land and political turmoil. Feminist advances claim that trauma theory articulate trauma as a distinctly socio-political form of distress.

The paper aims to probe into the nature and representation of trauma in the novel, *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai. Desai’s novels explore the experiences and struggles of women in Indian society. It is observed that Desai’s women characters suffers from trauma, suffering, and loss further these impacts the lives of its characters in various ways. Alienation, detachment, memory and the pain of their past lives is often highlighted to project the vulnerability of the women characters. The novel considered for the study delves into the psychological effects of past traumas, published in 1977; it also presents reclusion, isolation and resulting out of traumatic suffering of married life of female protagonist Nanda Kaul. Desai has presented the most unpleasant fact of married life in a patriarchal society. Considering Caruth theory of trauma, where she says that the effect of trauma is seen in “belatedness”, the study investigates that Nanda Kaul, the protagonist of the novel is a victim of trauma because of her past life. The traumatic experience results in changing her attitude towards life. It even changed her outlook of looking into self. The self doubt that emerges because of the traumatic experiences further restricts her from mingling in everyday activities and life. The proposed study attempts to apply the key concept of Caruth’s trauma theory to analyze Nanda Kaul’s sufferings.

Nanda Kaul is suppressed by her husband and she accepts it, do all her chores according to her husband’s wish. Although it is seen that she later realizes that she is tired of living as a dutiful wife. The effect of trauma does not allow her to fight back her situation like new women rather she takes the root of escape by moving to live in isolation. Caruth’s theory of trauma suggests that it is not easy for a victim to articulate the amount of pain they undergo therefore they choose alienation or isolation to project their vulnerable situation. Nanda kaul’s oppression takes place in a variety of ways in the patriarchal society, under her own roof, by her husband. Her failure in receiving care and love, not being able to take her own decisions, and self-sacrificing situations are few of the reasons of her traumatic and psychological disturbances. She has always presented herself as a good hostess to her husband’s guests. As a vice chancellor’s wife she had lived a life which was crowded and with full of social activities but

those were meaningless and unsatisfying to her as she was involved in those activities only because of her obligation to her husband. It sounded to her like a fake socialization. She has been constructed by her husband to behave as the patriarchal society wanted her to be.

After the death of her husband, Nanda vacates the vice-chancellor's house and come over to Kasauli. She identifies herself with the lonely pine trees. She likes the 'bareness', the emptiness of the garden of Carignano. The first intrusion that comes into her isolated life is the letter informing her that Tara's daughter Raka, her great grandchild will come to spend her holidays at Carignano. The letter comes as a threat to Nanda, as if Raka would bring her back to suffering. Nanda Kaul's dislike for the city life results in her escape to Carignano. She has no interest in the big family that she had to manage or to be the vice-chancellor's wife simply to entertain guests. Nanda Kaul's yearning for living in isolation and privacy depicts her as a traumatic person who is unable to enjoy the company of family and friends but enjoys the bareness of life and nature. The root cause of trauma in Nanda Kaul is the emotional deprivation which later with age turns into frustration and isolation. She has encountered estrangement regarding her gender identity inside the four walls of her husband.

According to Caruth's trauma theory, trauma generally remains unarticulated or inexpressible due to society's linguistic inadequacy in conveying the complexities of the victim. Nanda Kaul too faces these inadequacies as a wife in a male dominated society. The unspoken feelings of Nanda later find a way to articulate in the silence of Carignano. The silence in Nanda Kaul's character gives insights to her traumatic experiences. Nanda Kaul lived a subjugated life under her husband "Mentally she stalked through the rooms of that house-his house, never hers..." (Desai 20). She could never feel the sense of belongingness in her house because she has been discriminated in that house as a wife, woman and even as a mother. To escape from the traumatic past she isolates herself after her husband's death. She finds a way to escape her sufferings as "She had suffered from the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess. She had been so glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave it all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again" (Desai 32). The final chapter of the novel highlights her failure to speak the unspoken feelings, the unarticulated realities that comes as an outburst of her emotions after she receives the news of Ila Das's death but she still fails to say No "No, she wanted to tell the man on the phone, No, she wanted to cry, but could not make a sound. Instead, it choked and swelled inside her throat. She twisted her head, then hung it down, down, let it hang" (Desai 158). She wanted to express it but the narrative suggests that she choked and swelled her feelings inside her throat.

Caruth, also explains in her theory that Trauma is a cyclical process as it remains unintegrated within the individual's consciousness. We get to observe the same pattern of cyclical process in Nanda Kaul's character. Her trauma reemerges when she receives a letter stating her that Raka her great grandchild is coming to spend her holidays in Carignano. She takes it as a threat to her isolation from the family and from the memories of her past. The rejection of her husband was personal in the surface level but the effect that is seen in her is an extreme result of traumatic stress, where she is impaired of comprehending real-time experiences and later led to isolate herself. This cyclical process of trauma occurs in Nanda Kaul's life in another situation when Ila Das calls Nanda with an intention of visiting her. She is again reminded of her husband though she wanted to get rid of his memories "Still staring at the hen which was greedily gulping down bits of worm, she thought of her husband's face and the way he would plait his fingers across his stomach and slip heavy lids down over his eyes whenever Ila Das came..." (Desai 23).

The narrative at the end of the novel is fragmented at the same time it highlights the highest point of traumatic effect when Nanda Kaul was informed over phone call that Ila Das has been strangled, raped and found dead “ Yes, Madam,’ the sure voice repeated , slightly impatient of her histrionics. ‘ her body was found by the villagers. She has been strangled. The doctor is here. He claims she has been raped” (Desai 158). Further, it triggers her painful memory and she drops the telephone and throws herself back to her traumatic days:

“ No,no, it is a lie! No,it cannot be, it was a lie-Ila was not raped, not dead... Nor had her husband loved and cherished her and kept her like a queen-he had only done enough to keep her quite while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children-the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them”(Desai 158).

Her sufferings has been suppressed and she never gave an expression to those sufferings when her husband was alive nor is she able to give a true expression to it now “ Unfortunately, the formation of the female self cannot get the full face because of her inherited volatile present position and power which are not only fragmented but also distorted.” (Saha 238).

Conclusion:

In conclusion it can be said that Desai has portrayed a valuable insight into the lives of women who remains unspoken or silent in their lives and later becomes a victim of trauma. Cathy Caruth’s theory offers a valuable foundation to understand trauma that women faces in their everyday lives. It reveals how the power dynamics within the family has the capacity to ruin the life of the subordinate member(s) of a house and society at large. The impact of societal pressure and familial expectations has moulded Nanda Kaul to struggle for individuality but the struggle ends without a voice for herself. The traumatic feeling in Nanda Kaul is a result of rejection and self-doubt which assimilated over years of unspoken feelings and later recurs cyclically in the form of traumatic attacks.

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