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TRAUMA OF LOSS AND TERROR AS PORTRAYED IN PAT BARKER'S DOUBLE VISION

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ABSTRACT

Literature has be gifted language that showcases the inner world of man. It provides a space for memory, introspection, flashback and awful reminiscence, coloured by pain, wound and trauma. In simple words, trauma is a damage to the mind that occurs as a result of a severely distressing event. Contemporary literary trauma theory focuses on the fact that trauma creates a speechless fright that destroys identity. The Man Booker Prize winner Pat Barker, weaves the theme of memory, trauma, survival and recovery through her direct, blunt and plainspoken works. Pat Barker's post-9/11 novel *Double Vision* explores the historical, social and individual traumas as an aftermath of collapse of world trade centre, Bosnian crisis and many such atrocities in the history. This novel projects out trauma and its reverberation on Barker's characters that is painted by a sense of loss and terror. The paper explores how trauma is being portrayed by the author in the text and how it plays an important role in shaping individual's perceptions and thoughts.

Keywords: Memory, Wound, Trauma, Identity, Loss, Terror.

Introduction

Patricia Mary W. Barker, a British writer and novelist born on 8 May 1943 in Yorkshire, who writes mostly about the after effects of world war, is best known for her Regeneration Trilogy. The trilogy includes a set of novels that explore First World War history with a focus on its aftermath of trauma. The first novel in the series is *Regeneration*; the second is *The Eye in the Door*, and the last one is *The Ghost Road*. Barker outlines the theme of trauma, memory, survival and recovery through her works. *Double Vision* is set in the repercussions of the September 11 attack of the world trade center in 2001, an event that trembled the whole world. The event as such is not mentioned in the novel, but we see that each and every incident makes the reader to think of the matter of violence and futility of war which forces each individual, more or less considering the proximity to it, towards a farthest end of suffering. This suffering regardless of physical injury or mental collapse derives voice through literary representation or any other art forms. As a result we get a true picture of suffering. Barker thus stick on to the opinion that trauma can essentially be dealt by translating it into language. This is what she does in almost all of her works.

Trauma in *Double Vision*

When he closed his eyes, Stephen's brain filled with images of shocked people covered in plaster dust. Grey dust blocking their nostrils, caking their eyelids. Gritty on the floor of the hotel lobby, trampled up

the stairs and along the corridor to his room, where the television screen domesticated the roar and tumult, the dust, the debris, the cries, the thud of bodies hitting the ground, reduced all this to silent images, played and replayed, and played again in a vain attempt to make the day's events credible. (Barker 96-97)

The protagonist Stephen Sharkey of the novel *Double Vision*, being a war correspondent is burdened with the layered traumas of the Bosnian conflict, the attacks of September 11, and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Though he has resorted the rest of his life writing about the ethics of presenting the pain of others suffering from horrors of war, still he is haunted by his past memories of terror that his postings in a variety of war-torn regions gave him.

The lines quoted above simply suggests how far Stephen is drawn by the trauma of the September 11 attack that Barker presents through Stephen's and indeed her own perspective as "not a date anybody was likely to forget.." (Barker 96). Coincidentally, the attacks occur on the same day that the protagonist Stephen Sharkey's marriage virtually ends, after he has called his wife, probably to dispel her anxieties about his wellbeing, only to find her in bed with another man. Symbolically, the destruction of the towers amplifies the shock of personal disappointment that he received as a trauma of the loss of his wife. Long after the attacks, images of September 11 seen directly or mediated by the television screen come back to Stephen with astounding clarity and insistence.

Stephen's trauma of the past haunts his present though he is far away from places and experiences that offered him those and in Cathy Caruth's terms as explained in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*,

The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of the historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. (17)

Clearly this is the reason why those memories are painfully lodged in his mind and he periodically rehearses it, only to realize that he has not managed to assimilate it properly, despite the lengthy passage of time. Stephen and Ben Frobisher worked together in Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan, capturing the atrocity of war in their art, Stephen in his war reporting and Ben in his photography. Unfortunately, Ben is killed in the war of Afghanistan while capturing photo. Stephen, after his colleague's death retires from the war and later suffers from posttraumatic disorder, so he goes to live with his brother. In his new place too he is not completely peaceful.

In order to capture the far-reaching consequences of the events in New York, Barker locates the plot of her novel as far from the urban terror as possible, setting her narrative in a village near Newcastle, England, plagued by the foot-and-mouth disease at that time. An overall atmosphere of the novel gives a gloom in the beginning which by the end turns hopeful. In a different sense the village can arouse Stephen's memories of horror and the death of his friend Ben, because it is in this village where Ben's widow Kate lives as a sculptress. Stephen thus attempts to escape the wars he and Ben have covered together by taking refuge in a symbolic safety zone. Yet even against this seemingly peaceful background, echoes of the 9/11 attacks persist in the form of the carcasses of farm animals being burned, setting off "clouds of foul-smelling black smoke," "a stench of rotting flesh," and "scraps of burnt hair and skin whirling into the air" (Barker 31).

Stephen at times feels numbness in Barker's words, and also feels impossible to sleep having disturbed by nightmares and surrounding sounds. In Stephen's brother Robert's house indeed, he is haunted each night like, "Once, he jerked awake at a sudden sound – the creak of a floorboard perhaps? – but the sound wasn't repeated and he made himself relax" (Barker 49). Barker herself asserts again in the work *Double Vision* that, "His sleep was threadbare, like cheap curtains letting in too much light. He woke, slept, turned over, slept again, and then woke finally with a cry in the blackness, disoriented, thinking he could hear the patter of rain on

polythene" (50). These are undoubtedly the signs of trauma that Stephen suffers. As in Caruth's observation in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*,

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. (91- 92)

During his time and work with Ben, Stephen had witnessed many horrible and brutal incidents that carved a traumatic wound upon his mind to such an extent that he, later in his life is reminded of it. Crisis of responsibility is most powerfully explored in the context of the violent image which frequently returns to Stephen during the nightmares and flashbacks which characterize his Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He and Ben had, in Sarajevo, discovered a young girl who had been raped and murdered, the violence of war. This was at first, or on the moment not fully assimilated by Stephen but later as is noticed he is haunted very badly. It was Stephen who had interfered with the scene, who touched the violated body of the girl, if only to endow her with dignity. Yet what is so offensive to Stephen is that Ben has moved beyond the ostensibly objective role of the foreign correspondent, and become not simply an obsessive observer, but one who recreates the violent act out of the dedication and passion to his profession. Ben and Stephen had moved on without doing anything partially due to a thought that it was not a matter of concern for them as far as their assigned duty is done. But Stephen felt shocked and beaten. Immediately he felt ashamed and guilty for they were helpless and could feel "the girl's eyes boring into the back of his neck" (Barker 54). Judith Lewis Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* suggests,

Feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience. (39)

The very incident became embedded in Stephen's unconscious mind and later its repetition is seen as nightmares and as Barker put forth in the text "Stephen lay cramped and wakeful inside his sleeping bag, thinking about the girl, and the way her eyes had looked up at him, seeing nothing" (Barker 55). As Judith Herman says in *Trauma and Recovery*,

Just as traumatic memories are unlike ordinary memories, traumatic dreams are unlike ordinary dreams. In form, these dreams share many of the unusual features of the traumatic memories that occur in waking states. They often include fragments of the traumatic event in exact form, with little or no imaginative elaboration. Identical dreams often occur repeatedly. They are often experienced with terrifying immediacy, as if occurring in the present. Small, seemingly insignificant environmental stimuli occurring during these dreams can be perceived as signals of a hostile attack, arousing violent reactions. And traumatic nightmares can occur in stages of sleep in which people do not ordinarily dream. Thus, in sleep as well as in waking life, traumatic memories appear to be based in an altered neurophysiologic organization. (28)

Stephen's stress in mind could be analyzed as a part of his conscience which later attacks him several times. He felt like "she was waiting for him, that's the way it felt. She had something to say to him, but he'd never managed to listen, or not in the right way" (Barker 55). After his arrival in Robert's house too Stephen wakes up sometimes to observe that "nothing like this darkness in the city, ever. Deep black, like some of those nights in Africa" (Barker 72). Stephen finds light, more frightening than darkness, this is because even in his conscious state of mind he is troubled by his horrors and it also seems that the details of his dream keeps on invading his waking mind making him "buried alive" (Barker 72). Repeatedly Stephen is reminded of the smell in the stairwell of Sarajevo where the girl huddled on a mattress, who laid there dead. The smell in Barker's words is "a smell Stephen fought against recognizing" (Barker 52).

Though Stephen's marriage ended, he feels attracted towards Justine who is too younger than him and to escape from his loneliness and past he deliberately chooses to spend time with her. Once when both of them walked to the forest nearby, Justine disappeared into the darkness of the wood. Stephen's traumatic memory began to operate on him, even though he became accustomed to the dark, the loneliness and atmosphere made him wait in silence and "the thick darkness of nights in Africa came back to him, pressure building behind the thin membrane of everyday life like matter in a boil" (Barker 89).

Barker tries to question the ethics of representing war and the pain of others through the character of Ben and presents forth Stephen as a helpless witness who broods upon the thoughts of the raped girl. Barker's writing style indeed is unconventional and has a nonlinear structure which can be marked as a characteristic feature of the narratives of trauma. The plotlines are alternatively presented at times to show how Stephen's and Kate's life share the trauma of loss of Ben. Stephen retires from the terror of war with guilty memories to hide himself into a peaceful countryside but there also he finds violence randomly. Violence and the violation of bodies also occur in the apparent safety of Stephen's post-war refuge in England, for example, when Justine is brutally beaten up by burglars, Stephen is obliged to watch the burglary helplessly from a spatial distance, but certainly not with emotional distance. Stephen finds himself connected with Justine. He almost kills one of the burglars, when he manages at last to come to Justine's rescue. Stephen's story is portrayed with intrusive flashbacks. His trauma, as portrayed by Barker is due to some universal events like those affecting larger sections of the world and, as in Michelle Balaev's terms in her article, Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,

The traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies. We can see that the trauma novel provides a picture of the individual that suffers, but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an "every person" figure. Indeed, a significant purpose of the protagonist is often to reference a historical period in which a group of people or a particular culture, race or gender, have collectively experienced massive trauma. (155)

Kate, Ben's sculptor wife, is left both numb and destroyed by her loss, a loss that becomes everything for her. She takes a job of creating a giant Christ for a prime site in a churchyard. Trauma caused by the death of near and dear ones remain for a life time. This is the case with Kate. Being alone in her home once she and Ben spent their days together, Kate is left broken after Ben's death. She receives a second blow in the form of a car accident, which leaves her hand damaged. Barker begins her text with the narrative of Kate's accident, a harsh happening in one's life who is slowly trying to recover from the traumatic wound of her life partner's death.

Barker mentions in *Double Vision* that after Kate's recovery from the accident, "there was something else, something she needed to get clear, a memory that bulged above the surface, showed its back and then, in a burst of foam, turned and sank again" (Barker 13). This is how people suffering traumatic memories drift in and out of consciousness and may at times have confused memories and chaos in mind. Kate feels flashes of terror of the accident returning to her mind and all on a sudden, to escape from it, she closes her eyes. But she is completely aware that Ben's memories can never be erased from her heart as she did it with the returning terror of her accident. It is clear that Kate is so obsessed with her loss,

She was thinking of another road, in Afghanistan, the road Ben had died on. For a moment she felt a deep affinity with him, closeness, and then it vanished, and the loneliness rushed back, worse than before. She raised her hand to her neck and touched Ben's amulet, feeling the disc cold under her fingertips, rasping it along the chain. (Barker 14)

Another of her Kate's despair came out of her inability and helplessness to complete the work of Christ assigned to her due to her poor physical condition caused by the accident. She repeatedly feels a lack of confidence that the author mentions, "and she couldn't do it. She couldn't work at all without an assistant..." (Barker 17). Kate is assisted by Peter Wingrave, who turns out to be an ex-convict who had committed murder as a child and shows disturbing signs of psychopathic behavior later in the novel. Peter too shall be seen as suffering from a childhood trauma. In the course of the novel Peter appears mysterious to her. To an extent the trauma she suffers decays her identity and the lack of confidence and distrust that she finds in her assistant

Peter is due his forceful intrusion to her work, Christ's statue. Kate finds out that Peter during night visits her studio to make alterations to her own Christ figure which makes her terribly smashed. This could also be symbolically read as chaos and confusions that lead to her identity crisis. For Kate, sculpting or the very art is a form of revival from her sufferings or trauma. She could never allow her trauma to overpower her life, here Peter shall be considered as an evil power, like the traumatic memories Kate is trying to erase. To her it appears that "he looked mad. He looked totally, utterly deranged, and he was destroying her Christ" (Barker 178). Peter was miming or pretending to be her and all on a sudden she feels, "he was stealing her power in an almost ritualistic way. She couldn't confront him, because she couldn't begin to understand what she was dealing with..." (Barker 178). Barker makes it clear that for Kate in the novel,

She felt a spasm of revulsion, not from him but from herself, as if he had indeed succeeded in stealing her identity. It was easy to believe that what she'd seen in the studio, through the crack in the door, was a deranged double, a creature that in its insanity and incompetence revealed the truth about her. (179)

The resultant disorientation of herself can be analyzed by Judith Herman's words in *Trauma and Recovery*; "Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God. Their self-esteem is assaulted by experiences of humiliation, guilt, and helplessness" (41). Clearly this is what happens to Kate, by the helplessness she suffers in completing her statue by hiring an assistant. And thereby Kate feels her identity being shattered by Peter.

Coupled by the terror of the accident and the eternal loss of her husband, Kate faces obstacles in completing her statue. This is the reason why Kate, after the accident finds it so difficult to complete her work, also to live without her husband. Kate too like Stephen suffers sleepless nights due to her physical and emotional injuries that Barker describes as "her state of dream-filled, dry mouthed semi consciousness no longer qualified as sleep" (Barker 63). Even her studio at times appears to her in an unpleasant atmosphere which she reluctantly avoids and "let herself out into the icy winter air" (Barker 71) in order to have a refreshment. Barker's portrayal of the landscape in the novel is indeed arousing gloom in us as the story begins in a winter season. Barker's words in the text,

The weather turned colder, until one day, returning from her walk, she noticed that the big puddle immediately outside her front gate was filmed with ice, like a cataract dulling the pupil of an eye. She heated a bowl of soup, built up the fire and huddled over it, while outside the temperature dropped, steadily, hour by hour, until a solitary brown oak leaf detaching itself from the tree fell on to the frost-hard ground with a crackle that echoed through the whole forest. (1-2)

Literary representation of trauma with such a specified figurative language, portraying trauma could be described in terms of the character's mental state which could be based on the surroundings and the previous associations with it. This is the reason with Kate who is suffering the trauma of the loss of her husband. Their home, Kate's studio, Ben's room and the surroundings where both of them lived together, would definitely leave memories of Ben and several of their moments fresh in Kate's mind. Many a times Kate is seen reminiscing about Ben and when she and Stephen met for the first time, Kate said to Stephen,

'I've got some of his Afghanistan stuff over in the studio. The last things he took.' Her voice stayed steady, but her eyes were bright. He looked away, giving her time to recover herself, but there was something she had to say first. 'And I want to thank you for sending this back.' She touched the amulet round her neck. (Barker 118)

Stephen wonders about Kate's strength of mind and Barker portrays how she has become used to it,

she genuinely didn't seem to mind the isolation. He guessed her loneliness was the deeper kind that comes from the absence of one person, and she really didn't care whether other people were around or not. (Barker 117)

She is seen so beaten and bruised by the trauma that to an extreme extent she has become numb. Stephen and Kate go through Ben's photographs and Kate struggles with her tears at once losing all her control. Even though she might have used to be alone when Ben had been away for weeks at times, the present situation which she endures shows something different and for her Ben's room was "so much a place where two people lived, worked, talked, squabbled, drank, cooked, made love" (Barker 124). Judith Herman proposes few notions in her work *Trauma and Recovery* about the characteristics of trauma with reference to traumatized individual's relation to the society and her findings are as follows,

Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately. The profound disruption in basic trust, the common feelings of shame, guilt, and inferiority, and the need to avoid reminders of the trauma that might be found in social life, all foster withdrawal from close relationships. But the terror of the traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments. The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others. (40)

This could be the reason why Stephen left his job as a war correspondent from the war-torn regions and retired his rest life writing. In the peaceful cottage his brother Robert offers him in order to accommodate his writing and help relieve the trauma of war and divorce. Stephen defines his current location in contrast to his painfully iconic memory of Sarajevo within the text *Double Vision*,

No skulls in the grass, no girls with splayed thighs and skirts around their waists revealing even in the early stages of decomposition, what had been done to them before they died. No smell of decay clinging to the skin. Just a square of window fringed by dark leaves. (49)

In the new place, to an extent Justine becomes a comfort for him. But still, Stephen's actions are determined by his war trauma, when he finds Justine being attacked by the burglars and his report to police about the incident shows how his brain is stored with traumatic memories. Barker narrates in *Double Vision*,

He went back over the story he'd told the police, and then the other story: the one he hadn't needed to tell them because – thank God – it wasn't relevant. Locked in his brain, though, was the truth. All the way down the hillside he'd had flashbulbs exploding in his head. So many raped and tortured girls – he needed no imagination to picture what might be happening to Justine. It would not have surprised him to find her lying like a broken doll at the foot of the stairs, her skirt bunched up around her waist, her eyes staring. (250)

The very image of the Sarajevo stair and the raped girl might have flashed through Stephen's mind when he so Justine lying on the floor. Echoes of post-9/11 urban disaster haunts the narrative as a whole in the form of the images of a dust-filled city added by other images of snow, fog, the whiteness of Kate's studio, and the impenetrable sea mist which endangers Stephen and Justine in their boat trip to Holy Island. When Stephen enters Kate's studio, it makes him uneasy to look towards the white plaster figures, as for Stephen, these reminded him of the corpses photographed by Ben. Justine's case is something different; she is unable to complete her university studies due to the interruption of her illness, namely glandular fever. Later she gets into a job in Robert's house specializing in caring for difficult and demanding children.

The shock of a sudden attack by the burglars inside the house leaves Justine victimized and from then on, even her own "audible breaths frightened her" (Barker 251). It was actually a terror that Justine went through during the attack and later she began to question about her safety to herself and to the world. Barker adopts Justine's viewpoint to convey the farthest end of skepticism in Justine. After having hospitalized, Barker explains in *Double Vision*,

she sat on one of the chairs and looked at the other. The separate part of herself wandered round the edges of the room, glancing at her now and then, observing, she supposed, deciding whether that body over there was a safe place to be. (252)

Barker also portrays Justine brave enough to deliver the account of the attack to her father Alec Braithwaite. Not to make her father worry, she even assures him that “I know I look a mess, but I’m all right, honestly, don’t worry about me, I’m all right. No worse than being mugged on the street and a lot better than...” and Barker says “she forced the words out. A lot better than being raped” (Barker 253). Afterwards Justine feared even the public place to be left alone and in the text portrayed as follows,

She took a long deep breath. Her father wanted to bring the car to her, but she wasn’t having that. She wasn’t ready to be left on her own, not even in this public place with people coming and going, so they walked across the car park together. A long way. (Barker 255)

Justine’s behavioral changes are the result of the violence that she faced. After the incident Justine dream is portrayed in *Double Vision* as follows,

She dreamt she was far out, a long way from land on a frozen lake. She had been walking for hours, her boots squeaking on the ice, a cold wind flattening her skirt against the backs of her legs. Probably she ought to stop and turn back towards the line... don’t look a voice whispers in her mind... ahead there is only the trackless waste of ice, catching a dull gleam from the stars. (266)

The dream could be interpreted as Justine’s sense and doubt about safety. As said earlier, about the traumatic flashbacks and nightmares, Justine begins to have such sleepless nights. But still she keeps herself cool reassuring nothing has happened to her.

Conclusion

Each character in the novel is suffering from trauma of one or the other kind. As Barker represents the horror of twenty- first century war indirectly there is a connection with a wider world of warfare with the intimate lives of people far from a war zone. When Kate suffers from the trauma of loss of her husband, Stephen and Justine suffer trauma caused by the terror of war and violence respectively. The portrayal of the suffering of the characters is brilliant. Trauma could be understood and worked through only by telling it and here is where one could rely on any forms of art and as far as this is concerned, literature matters. Translating mental wounds into words thereby serves to an extent as a redemptive too. By presenting the terrors and horrors of war through her works Barker also asserts a need to drive away all the evils from the society.

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