Reading Home as a Space of Trauma in Trezza Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place*

Bonjyotshna Saikia
Research Scholar, Department of English, Tezpur University
(bonjyotshnasaikia263@gmail.com)

Abstract:

Trezza Azzopardi's The Hiding Place (2000) is a novel about traumatic childhood experiences in the familial context, within the home. The concept of "trauma" in this paper encompasses an individual's suffering, and in doing so, the paper attempts to read the nuances of traumatic and post traumatic psychology. Dolores's disfigured hand as the object of stigmatisation ushers a series of corporeal and verbal abuse. This paper is an attempt to read the novel's depiction of trauma and the body, and the nuanced psyche of stigmatisation through the lens of trauma psychology and disability studies, and to read home as a space not of security, but of horror. Drawing theoretical insights from Rosemarie Thomson, Cathy Caruth, and Judith Butler among others, the paper explores the process of the autodiegetic narrator's retelling, retracing, and recollecting a traumatic past. The paper also endeavours to look into how the space of home can be turned into a space of trauma through the constant stigmatisation and othering in the familial context.

Keywords: *Autodiegetic narrator, Corporeality, Home, Trezza Azzopardi, Trauma, Stigmatisation.*

"There is no place like home!"

- Lyman Frank Baum

The paper refers to the above line by L. Frank Baum as this cliche singles out the unique aura of home, a place where human restlessness is supposed to give way to genuine contentment. But an invitation to a more literal reading of the phrase: there is no such place, renders the fact that home exists only in imagination. Dorothy in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)utters this line to give the readers an idea about how she desires to get back to her home in Kansas. But this paper attempts to read the line in a different light. The same place of security, of contentment can be turned into a place of trauma, as is the case with Dolores, the autodiegetic narrator in *The Hiding Place*. The title of the novel resonates the fact that Dolores is being hidden away against her wishes, in closed chest, in rabbit's cage — reiterating the claustrophobic, dehumanizing, and demeaning places of captivity and ostracism, of rejection — "there's really no more space for anyone else in this house" (Azzopardi 5). Her narrative is so much concerned with the 'space' of the house that nearly every other page describes her house, more specifically, the lack of 'space' — "practically a ward" (Azzopardi 6). Trezza Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place* (2000) is a story about the Gauci family (the father is a Maltese immigrant and the mother is Welsh), set in Cardiff, narrated through the perspective of the youngest daughter Dolores (also the victim of a tragic fire). The narrative is an enthralling account of how family, like fire, can change from something that bestows comfort and warmth to a vicious blaze, sparing none. It narrates the horrors of a traumatic childhood in a dream-like tapestry, knitting together distinct times and standpoints. The horror is often veiled through the beautiful lyricism, it is as if the narrator is simply stating a mundane affair in her life: "children burnt and children bartered: someone must be to blame" (Azzopardi 78). The nuanced depiction of the trauma that is so evident in

the narration is somewhat a beautiful conjunction of words together.The text examines the gripping effect of childhood trauma and the crucial requirement of trauma victims to make sense of and to accept their tormenting past. This paper attempts to read home as a space not of security, but of horror. In doing so, the paper also reads the psychological nexus of the protagonist and the process of recounting the traumatic event, exploring if it is feasible to mend the scar by manifesting in words.

Each of the daughters in the Gauci family encounters abuse and trauma in diverse manners. Celesta, the eldest, is married off to a "grotesque" looking man of forty (Azzopardi 83). She is just seventeen, when she gets married to a man of her father's age. Marina is bartered off by her father to Joe Madera in exchange for the apartment and some money. Fran is sent to children's home, despite having a family, as she is characterised by 'Pyrophilia' (a condition where she attains fulfilment in anything related to fire). It is this condition that leads to a fire in the house, which nearly incinerates Dolores. Her trauma is evident through self-mutilation in the form of tattoos. Rose and Luca, on the other hand, use Dolores (their youngest sister) as a kind of an outlet through which they express their anger towards the inefficiency of their parents. The bullying of Dolores in the hands of Rose and Luca can be seen as an extended form of their latent desire to confront their parents, to confront their upbringing, to question the gradual dilapidation of their house, of their life.

Trauma victims undergo mental and physical wounds which are invisible, but Dolores's wounds are visible. Her body is the expression of her trauma, leading to the fear it generates as disabled bodies confront vulnerability and mortality of the perceiving subject. She becomes an object of fear, and thereby stigmatized, both within and outside her home. In the eyes of her father, Dolores is the embodiment of bad luck bearing its mark on the family. The fire incident has been etched into Dolores's body through her missing fingers, her facial scar and her burned scalp. The hand is a trauma of stigmatisation, more than being a trauma of corporeal disfigurement. This leads to a series of othering and stigmatisation within the sphere of the family itself. The trauma inflicted upon Dolores outside her family regarding her disfigured hand is far less compared to the trauma she has inside her home, where her father identifies her as "a devil had come into his house" (Azzopardi 264). The repeated indifference and bullying by her sisters Rose and Luca suggests that they consider Dolores a lesser human being because of her burnt hand. The novel is about the process of stigmatisation through otherness, leading to trauma. It is only through the "disfigured hand" that Dolores is identified with and labelled as "Crip" (Azzopardi 170).

Rosemarie Thomson in her *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) foregrounds how social relationships ascribe meanings to extraordinary bodies. The not-so normal bodies (in this case, Dolores's hand) are attributed value and meanings through cultural norms and "social framing" (Thomson 31). Mrs. Jackson's interest in Dolores's hand whenever she goes out, or Mrs. Riley recognizing Dolores through her 'disfigured hand' after thirty years provides ample evidence of this social frame to which Dolores was subjected to (Azzopardi 159). Similarly, Babette Rothschild talks about this phenomenon regarding the life long impact of trauma and the process of corporeal evocation on the traumatised individual. It is not the traumatic event that haunts survivors for decades afterward, but the impact or legacy of those events in the form of emotional, bodily, and behavioural memories. Freud argues about a "delayed" amelioration of the experience of trauma as memory (in psychosexual context). He talks about how the individual could decode the actual meaning of the event only after a delayed revival of the event as memories. Traumatic memory is inherently shaped by the unconscious motives that confer meanings to the event. Trauma is so much interlinked with the body and the mind, that Jamie Marich argues how trauma is manifested in the body through various kinds of pain. For instance, Dolores's account of the recurring "Ghost pain" weaves the narrative together with other

trauma that Dolores experienced as a child. The "Ghost pain" is the mysterious neurological perception that emanates in her absent fingers. This recurring pain or sensation reveals its presence through the missing fingers. This occurrence is termed as "phantom pain" in medical sciences, which can be conspicuously existent and tangible, as an essential segment of the body (Halligan 255). This pain confounds Dr Reynolds, who finds it intriguing to "miss something [Dolores] never knew" (Azzopardi 80). However, for Dolores, this is not strange; not strange to miss something one never had, as she misses her sister Marina whom she only met as a baby. This episode captures the psychology of loss in a provocative way, transporting the readers to an initial point of trauma in Dolores's life.

Cathy Caruth in her influential *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) argues that trauma is expressed, in most cases, through silence, through the dereliction of words, through the failure of language. However, in her approach, Caruth takes only the abstract dimensions of trauma. The novel, on the other hand, implies the concrete aspect, rendering a literary approach to childhood and family trauma. The nucleus on childhood and family trauma helps in understanding the specific and concrete rather than metaphorical and abstract aspects of trauma. Trauma, as borrowed from ancient Greek, originally denotes "a violent injury from an external cause that breached the body's integrity" (Brette 1800). In other words, this can be translated as physical and mental wound. The narrator endeavours to comprehend how her present sense of self has been affected by her memories and her past. The obsession with memory is due to the lack of it, as Anne Whitehead asserts, "in the face of mounting amnesia, there is an urgent need to consciously establish meaningful connections with the past" (Whitehead 82). The narrator seeks the past and in doing so faces a complex dilemma on her part, mingled with instabilities and tensions.

The autodiegetic narrator is named Dolores (which is no coincidence), the Spanish term for 'sorrow', and also the plural of 'dolor' meaning 'pain' in Latin. It is this pain and sorrow which is reiterated throughout the narrative. Dolores' sisters refer to her as "Crip", and her father calls her a "*Sinistre*", "*la diavola*", "*il demone*" (Azzopardi 170, 64, 86). These labels demean Dolores and vilify her which is reflective of the phenomenon of "linguistic vulnerability" which Judith Butler explores in *Excitable Speech* (1990). According to Butler, this process of naming and labelling can be cited as examples of "injurious speech" or "hate speech", which refers to the way words can injure an individual. Names play an important role in forming one's identity, in shaping one's individuality, and if that individual is called an "injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned" (Butler 02). Therefore, in the light of the theory by Butler, it is evident that Dolores has been made the subject of abuse through the process of naming and labelling by her sisters and father. Through the process of "sedimentation" produced by repetition of her "derogated" and "demeaned" names, Dolores's identity had been formed within her house through her so-called bad hand, her missing fingers, and her scarred face (Butler 10). She has grappled to defy her stigmatisation through her defying of the 'injurious' names, and not to perceive herself through those labels; but somehow, it has shaped her, it has been so much ingrained within her, that her disfigured hand became the onus of her existence. Right from her birth, she has been named in a way which implies disappointment. In a heart wrenching scene after the fire incident when Dolores was just a month old, her father visits the hospital and he calls her "Bambina, Bambina", as he fails to recall her name (Azzopardi 54). In another instance, when Dolores revisits her house after thirty years, she discovers a photograph of herself and Luca; the photograph reveals her mother's indifference towards her where she strikes the spelling of Dolores's name twice. It is however interesting to see how Dolores revered her mother as a child, and clings to her, as she "loves this; love being here in the kitchen with just my mother and no one else" (Azzopardi 74). This process of naming is also related to the process of objectification. Rosemarie Thomson in her book *Staring*

(2009) talks about the role of gaze into objectifying the victims. She argues that the body is foregrounded through the process of stigmatization, and brought to the front, into everyone's gaze. The novel explicitly highlights the scenes where Dolores has moments of being the object of the gaze. It starts right within the family, with her father branding her as 'Sinister' to her sisters treating her as an object, as an outlet of their frustration, replacing her name with the noun 'Crip' (enemy).

However, Dolores fails to perceive the impact that these names would have in shaping her existence, partly because she strives to see her home as a source of protection. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) delineates this quintessential quandary experienced by children who are engulfed in the nexus of family trauma. She insists on the veil of trust that a traumatised child has to develop on the part of her "untrustworthy and unsafe" parents (Herman 102). In the process of creating this veil, the 'badness' of a parent is shrouded and the child attempts to reinstate an image of 'goodness', in turn, blaming themselves. This is evident in Dolores's attempt to somehow instill a sense of guilt in her narratives regarding certain acts of her father. For instance, Dolores emphasizes how her father had pangs of consciousness when he decides to barter his daughters. This process of developing a sense of basic trust on the part of Dolores is also apparent in the portrayal of her mother. In the narrative about her mother, Dolores cites reasons for her failure in protecting her daughters. But the contradictory accounts of her parents (retrospect accounts mainly) conspicuously portray this dilemma in Dolores as a victim of childhood trauma. Some passages in the text evince to the fact that Mary might not have been as loving and protecting as Dolores claims her to be. The way Mary 'protects' Dolores by not sending her to school or allowing her to play outside the house are ostensible reasons to 'protect' her; but this protection apparently is a shield against the shame that she might face in the society as a mother of a disfigured child. Mary's calling her daughter 'Dol' (Doll) is a testimony to the fact that she deprives her daughter of agency and independence. She rarely accompanies her daughter outside of their house.

The text's fragmented and disjointed narration is crucial in understanding the kind of trauma that the narrator undergoes during her childhood. Her home, which is supposed to be the safest place, is a site of her trauma. The six daughters endures their father's indifference and abuse which brings to the fore the questions of trauma and gender in the interlinked nexus of responsibility and guilt. Dolores's unquestioning acceptance of her physical disfigurement and hostility in her own home is evident in the first part of the narrative, when she is unaware of a world outside of her home. It is only in the later part, when she returns to Cardiff (her hometown) after thirty years as an adult, that she starts to ponder about the appalling entities that have traumatised her both physically and emotionally. The novel chronicles the dark realities of family traumas and in doing so, challenges the processes of remembering, narration, and representation. The novel is about the consequences that serious disordering in the family can have on individuals.Hence, this paper endeavoured to look into how the space of home can be turned into a space of trauma through the constant stigmatisation and othering in the familial context.

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