

Voices Doomed In The Abyss Of Trauma: Discussing Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract:

The notion of trauma rose into prominence with the publication of Caruth's Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History(1996) and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's Testimony: Crises of witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History(1992).Trauma gains relevance when it is perceived in a particular social and cultural discourse. The term first appeared in Caruth's Unclaimed Experiences, the origin of which can be traced back to the works of Paul De Man, who was the teacher of Caruth. Trauma theory is usually associated with the excruciating and haunting life experiences of the survivors of the Nazi Holocaust. This paper discusses how the notion of trauma works from the perspectives of the individual and the community in the novel: The Hungry Tide(2004) by Amitav Ghosh. The paper raises the following questions: How does displacement instill everlasting trauma in people? Does language limit traumatic narratives? Does trauma distort the history and temporality? The paper makes an attempt to answer all these fundamental doubts by analysing the instances in the novel.

Keywords: *Trauma, People, Community, Displacement, Memory, history, Language, Hungry Tide*

TROPE OF TRAUMA

In *Unclaimed Experience* Cathy Caruth says that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4).According to the studies conducted by Jacques Lacan, trauma emerges from void, created by extreme experiences, which cannot be articulated verbally (Balasev1).Trauma literature is a much sought after topic for critics and psycho analysts as it deals with the human psyche. Trauma cannot be represented and a dissociation may occur due to the inexplicable suffering caused by individual or collective stimuli (Balalev 1).

The novel, *The Hungry Tide* written in 2004 explores the history of the natives of the Sundarbans island in West Bengal, following a massive massacre in 1970's.Sundarbans comprising of immense labyrinth of tiny islands and entangled waterways, ironically narrates the complex and traumatic histories of settlements from 1950's to 2000.The land is hostile to its inhabitants with the potential threats of predators such as tigers, crocodiles, snakes, and sharks lurking around their habitats, and the natural disasters of cyclones and storms, foreshadowing an apocalyptic doom. The hue and cry to protect the ecosystem raised by conservationists coupled with the sweeping winds of modernity place the survival of the inhabitants of Sundarbans at stake. The author adopts two different narratives to give account of the trauma of the natives of the island. One focuses on the Seattle based American Cetalogist, Piyali Roy, who comes to the island for research and her interaction with Kanai Dutt. The

trauma of language serves as an impediment between them. The other one deals the recollection of the history of Sundarbans through the diary of Nirmal, the uncle of Kanai Dutt. Kanai meets her aunt, Nilima who is still living in the trauma of Nirmal's death, even after several years. Nirmal was a Marxist Revolutionary, who couldn't accomplish his revolutionary goals. The trauma of his unrequited love for Kusum and displacement from Calcutta haunted him, leading to his untimely death. Through these, the reader is able to gain a profound understanding of the traumatic experiences of these natives of the island, resulting from the alienation imposed by neo-colonialists, the incapability of language to narrate the traumatic experiences and impact of memories of past and impending traumas owing to natural and manmade catastrophes.

TRAUMA OF DISPLACEMENT

When a person undergoes a series of traumatic experiences, it can re-orient his state of mind leading to displacement of the self (Luci 260). In 1970's, refugees entered Morichjapi island in Sundarbans and settled there, which culminated in a bloody feud with the government. The novel discusses the lives of people who attempted to enter India from East Pakistan, during the Partition. The government did not want them to settle in West Bengal. What followed was a saga of violence and butchering. Thousands of unnamed people were slaughtered. Through the chronicles of partition, Ghosh attempts to redefine the trauma of the victims of the partition. Their social rank clubbed with their identity crisis augmented their trauma. In other words, those who are in exile may encounter misrecognition from dominant cultural formations. Ghosh raises the issue of national and religious identities of these refugees, to delve deep into the trauma created by their displacement.

One of the main characters who have encountered trauma from the childhood is Piya. She becomes an outcaste in the U.S.A, where she is treated as the 'Other, owing to her hybrid identity (Naumann). She is unable to fit herself into their cultural discourse and becomes an embittered 'other', in her homeland. Nirmal, the uncle of Kanai, wanted to bring radical changes in West Bengal. But he suffers from a nervous breakdown and is forced to leave Calcutta. Ghosh argues that living in exile can impose the burden of trauma, through a complicated narrative structure and an array of metaphors.

TRAUMA OF LANGUAGE

Trauma implies representability, inexpressibility and its inability to assimilate itself into the narrative. Van der Kolk states that traumatic experiences can occur in a fraction of second, which may go beyond the scope of language. (27). *The Hungry Tide* is set against the backdrop of the fictional island, Lusibari, Sundarbans. It's a chain of islands in the Bay of Bengal. Sundarbans means beautiful forest. The rich biodiversity encompassing flora and fauna makes it one of most resplendent biodiversity spots in India. But the natives know that at any time, tigers, a metaphor of the power of the natural world can attack them. They live in perpetual fear, but are unable to articulate it. According to Stern, "Language drives a wedge between two simultaneous forms of interpersonal experience: as it is lived and as it is verbally represented" (162). The natives of Sundarbans are unable to witness traumatic events, but they fall prey to their natural predator. Another instance testifying this argument is when a character named, Piddington issues a warning to the mighty British Government about its plans to construct a port in Calcutta. It would be catastrophic, as the mangroves which can prevent the storms from the coastlines of West Bengal would be destroyed with the construction of the new port. Piddington appears as a minor character, writing a frantic letter to the viceroy: "There would come a day when a great mass of salt water would rise up amidst a cyclone and drown the whole settlement" (Ghosh 286). His words fell on the deaf ears and the port which was supposed to stand at par with Singapore was devastated in a tsunami. If there is any discrepancy between actual

past and narrated past, it can lead to mental disturbance. (Stern 136). Piddington realizes the inadequacy of language to give account of the impending reality.

Traumatic experience is an exaggeration of normal experience. The ordinary gap between what is experienced and what is said is widened in trauma, so people find it difficult to express their trauma narrative. In the novel, the central characters are Piya, an American Indian cetologist and Kanai, a Delhi based translator. Kanai plays a pivotal role in the novel as he immediately brings the issue of language to the foreground. He assumes power just because he's able to speak the language which Piya cannot use. He takes advantage of the situation, while she's unable to get the information she needs, though she is an adroit in other languages. Piya speaks in Bengali, but is unable to comprehend what the natives of the Delta say about the traumatic narratives on tiger. Kanai believes that Americans including Piya are inferior to him, because they are unable to decode the local language. They are the victims and survivors simultaneously, but the barrier of language hinder their articulation. When Kanai confronts the tiger, he gets the epiphany that his language has failed him. The tiger ,better say beast was beyond what language can conjure becomes "an artifact of pure intuition, so real that the thing itself could not have dreamed of existing so intensely"(Ghosh 329).Trauma varies from one person to another, but it's articulation shares some unique features.

Piya, who was born in West Bengal, is settled in the U. S. A. Like all other migrants, her parents wanted her to master the English language so as to scale new heights in her career. Whenever she thinks of her homeland, what comes to her mind is her parents arguing in Bengali. This caused a deep wound in her mind, from which she could never free herself. "The accumulated resentments of their life were always phrased in that language, so that for her, its sound had come to represent the music of unhappiness"(Ghosh 93-94).The alien language turned out to be an unpleasant dream for Piya and her mother, in the American Paradise. We read: "There was a time once when the Bengali language was an angry flood trying to break down her door"(93).

TRAUMA OF MEMORY

Traumatic memories of arousing events that are not necessarily available to conscious memory may return, often suddenly and unexpectedly, as flashbacks, overwhelming emotions, or 'speechless horror', at some point of time (van der Kolk 43).Cathy Caruth says that the structure of trauma is associated with distorted history or temporality. The traumatic event is not experienced or understood fully at the time that it occurs, but only later in its insistent and intrusive return(12-29). Caruth's assumptions are based on Freud's '*Moses and Monotheism*', in which he argues that a man who encountered an fatal accident may not die, but may experience a number of nervous breakdowns later. Freud names it, 'traumatic neurosis' (309). Ghosh says "Every generation creates its own population of ghosts"(50),to remind the writers about how the natives are caught in a dreadful web of memories of the past. It is true that the characters in the novel live in a kind of traumatic neurosis. Women of Sundarbans are intimidated by frequent tiger attacks. They see tigers only at times, but that fear creates a sort of paranoia, which is inextricably interwoven with their lives. Likewise, cyclones sweep away boats, slaughtering the livestock. The novel gives account of the warning issued by Henry Piddington, the Englishman who tried to convince the imperial government about the threat of an impending disaster (Ghosh 286).He forecasts that the city of Canning may get devastated by a series of storms within fifteen years of its construction. The novel is centred on the psyche of the local people, which deeply embedded in a sort of traumatic neurosis. The fear element is always latent in them, though they live in an exotic island.

Trauma doesn't emerge from the unconscious, but from history(Caruth151). The traumatic experience cannot be fully deciphered by the victim; therefore it cannot remain as a memory or narrative in them.

On the flipside of the coin, trauma may continue to haunt the survivors for an uncertain period of time. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud states that the soldiers who survived bombshells, were often haunted by nightmares of fierce battles(292). The novelist says that women in the island clad themselves in the clothes of widows, whenever their husbands step out of the houses. They anticipate attack from their natural predators(tiger and cyclones).In other words, they are always haunted by the ghosts of a potential doom.

TRAUMA DEFYING HISTORY AND TIME

Trauma can violate the dimensions of history and time, which can manifest itself anytime and anywhere, it cannot simply be confined to a 'then' and 'there'. "The belatedness of trauma experiences means the troubling events have the ability to violate or disrupt physical spaces as well as temporal continuity"(Nazar and Schaffer 10).As a cosmopolitan writer, Ghosh chronicles the jeremiad of the refugees of Sundarbans, devoid of money and power."They could not speak the language of that area and the local people treat them as intruders, attacking them with bows, arrows and other weapons. For many years they put up with these conditions"(118).People like Nirmal wanted to bring about radical changes in West Bengal. But he couldn't and died of a nervous breakdown survived by Nilima, who worked for the emancipation of women whereas illiterates like Fokir are not free from dire poverty, which existed in their community, since Partition. Besides, the islands offer a disturbed environment. Tides can claim the land at any time. The voices of the unprivileged sections are sabotaged by the power of neo colonialists."It's not hard to ignore the people who are dying-after all, they are the poorest of the poor"(118).

Without collective trauma identities, individuals and groups cannot enter into dialogue (Nazar and Schaffer 15).People of the island believed in a goddess named Bon Bibi,whom they believed to have some power to save them from the natural predators. But Kusum is unable to leave the memories of her father, who was killed by a tiger, in the sea of oblivion. Though she cried for help from Bon Bibi, she received no help and was left in perpetual fear and trauma. Piya is able to narrate her trauma, only when the illiterate fisherman, Fokir saves her from the crocodile. "...found a way to let her know that despite the inescapable muteness of their exchanges, she was person to him"(Ghosh 76).

From a historical perspective, trauma is inextricably interwoven with human lives. People are forced to flee, leaving behind their dwelling and livestock, to escape the sound and fury of nature. Frequent cloudbursts in Assam and recent floods in Kerala and Tamilnadu underline the truth that mankind will never be free from the matrix of trauma and it can best expressed and understood through the works of literature.

Ghosh spent some years in the picturesque island, which enabled him to grasp the intensity of trauma faced by the natives of the Sundarbans. Each character in the novel experiences trauma in one way or the other. Kanai, who works as an international translator, who considers others inferior, feels uncomfortable in the presence of Piyali,who is a part of Indian diaspora.On the other end of the spectrum, Piya,despite all her knowledge is unable to communicate her ideas even to a forest guard. Other characters like Nilima and Nirmal shift to Lusibari, but are unable to escape the trauma of displacement. Through the characters who are suffused with their own grand narratives and world views, Ghosh traces the trope of trauma that reverberates beyond space and time.

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