

Trauma and Healing in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

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Abstract

Trauma is not simply a situational factor; it has a direct impact on the lives of the characters as it acts not only as a personal crisis but also as a social wound that has a long-term cultural implication. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini sets the plot on war, political instability and the continued violence against women. Both Mariam and Laila are witnesses and survivors and the way they relate and cope with war, loss and abuse reveals that repressed past can be dealt with so that both can recover on a personal and social front. This paper examines in terms of the trauma theory, the aspects of silence and suffering. The alternation of the 'acting out' and 'working through' discussed by LaCapra provides us with the picture of how characters change as they process memory and loss. Judith Herman presents in her threefold model a safety, remembrance, reconnecting model, the long-term process of despair to resilience that is demonstrated in the novel.

Keywords: Trauma, War, Afghanistan, History, Memory

Introduction

According to research on trauma, this field has embraced a significant interdisciplinary blend of psychology, psychoanalysis, history, and literary criticism, which really takes off with the start of the new millennium. In early research by Freud, traumatic experiences were analysed, but he analysed that those experiences are not fully comprehended at the moment they occurred. He states that trauma goes through the period of latency and it reappears in the form of anxiety, repetition etc. The understanding of how trauma returns belatedly and is not fully experienced at the time of occurrence can be seen in Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) and later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Caruth goes even deeper by contending that trauma is something that cannot be assimilated and instead breaks the identity and remains beyond the normal memory and narrative and is mediated by delayed recognition and dissociation "The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (4). Dominick LaCapra's distinction between acting-out and working-through clarifies how individuals re-experiencing the trauma begin to place it in perspective. The three stages of recovery outlined by Herman - Safety, Remembrance, Mourning and Reconnection show that trauma impacts entire communities and requires individual and interpersonal healing: "Recovery unfolds in three stages. The

central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety... the second stage is remembrance and mourning... the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life” (175).

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Khaled Hosseini puts the individual victimization within the communal history of Afghanistan, which was formed by the invasion, civil war, and repressive authorities that systematically endangered the independence of women. The trauma is depicted in the novel as a community wound that has cultural consequences, rather than an individual tragedy. Hosseini interweaves the history of Mariam and Laila to depict two generations of people whose suffering reflects the suffering of the rest of the nation. Their tales show the destructive effects of sexism and political unrest on the psychological aspect, particularly on the woman.

Mariam represents years of mental and physical torture in a patriarchal culture that has caused her to feel unwelcome and expendable. The first crack in the wall of her strength is that Nana imprints the feelings of patriarchal guilt and discredits Mariam with her harsh words, "You are nothing," (Hosseini 27). From her childhood, these words of Nana do not simply wound her but make a long- lasting psychological impact in her own self. The suicide of Nana is the unassimilated traumatic event that Mariam could not understand the loss occurred at that moment as she was in guilt and desertion. Trauma returns belatedly as it does not remain in the past and haunts Mariam throughout her life, a loss that is too profound and is not possible to be said entirely. "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 was precisely not known in the first instance returns to haunt the survivor later on." (Caruth 4-5). When Mariam is forced into marriage with Rasheed her life confines in domestic custody, her movements, her body and everything about her are controlled by fear, physical abuse, silence and humiliation. The forced marriage to Rasheed confines Mariam in long and suffocating subjugation that establishes the traumatic relationship between the victim and perpetrator. Herman writes "The perpetrator seeks to control the victim's entire life. He exercises control through fear, intimidation, and violence." (Herman 76). This is relevant from Rasheed's actions. His mood decides the atmosphere of their house and Mariam knows that even minor mistakes may result in punishments. Mariam's sense of self is slowly confined to Rasheed's insults and beatings. Over the years their house loses its sense of home and submission is used as a means of survival. Mariam's personality is developed through her forced marriage which includes humiliation, control and resistance.

Afghanistan war is not confined to battlefields only, it reaches homes, destroys families and ruptures lives. The conflict between personal ambitions and the tragedy of history is what makes Laila traumatized. The sudden death of her parents in a rocket explosion divides her identity and induces survivor's guilt that extinguishes her happiness. The unclaimed nature of her trauma is represented in "I should have died in the house with my mother, " this line represent her impotence of survival and the burden of living in the aftermath. Laila's father depicts connection to Afghanistan, its pride and continuity but when he dies her connections were cut off. Traumatic loss, as Herman observes, causes numbness and disconnection which blocks meaning of life "Traumatic loss destroys the sense of connection between individual and community, creating a crisis of meaning." (51-52). Trauma not only destroys personal emotions but also memory, love, culture and social belonging that shape's identity. When these bonds are destroyed the individual feels parted

from community and history and even from self. This experience of trauma separates Laila from social system and her past ambitions. After the death of her parents, Laila no longer sees herself as optimistic but rather a survivor confined in the circumstances. This state also leads her to more exploitation, forced marriage, isolation, and absence of agency.

The relationship between Mariam and Laila is the arena of recovering by witnessing and association. The friendship provides the security of memory and re-identification, which allows the trauma to be distributed without complete expression. As Judith Herman states that recovery from traumatic events can only be possible in relationships not in isolation. This is shown in the novel in how Mariam and Laila recover from trauma collectively and how their bond provides trust and protection. On the one hand, the murder of Rasheed becomes a point of departure for Mariam, and it provides her with the space to leave the role of the victim to an agent. In the case of Laila, the overturn of the Taliban completes her work-through process which allows her to relive her public life. Becoming a teacher again in Kabul makes deprivation a revival – “some of the other children call her ‘mother’” (Hosseini 455-456). By giving her daughter the name Mariam, Laila makes sure that sacrifice and resistance is carried forward, transforming individual trauma into shared ethical responsibility. Trauma then becomes a social responsibility, and it is proven that healing is not only an individual psychological process but also ethical, relational, and communal act stranded in memory and moral accountability.

Violence and Domestic Trauma of Mariam

The experience of Mariam in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* can be regarded as a never-ending game of oppression and fear shaping her everyday existence and getting embedded into her very self. Since the time of her birth, Mariam - a *harami*, which means an illegitimate child - was put in a system of shame that erodes her self-worth. Mariam was five years old when the first time she heard the word ‘*harami*’ (Hosseini 27). Nana constantly reminds the reader of illegitimacy not only to remind society of how unfair it can be, but also as a mechanism that strengthens shame and self-hatred to propel Mariam into a state of mind where her self-esteem continues to sink. This also prepares Mariam for her future emotional dependence and normalizes the domination. Relationship of Mariam with Rasheed reflects the traumatic bonding, physical violence, humiliation and forced submission burden her in a state of acceptance rather than resistance. She was taught from her childhood that she is unwanted and not deserving which reflects how early life trauma can be transferred and made to persist in relationships. The Afghanistan situation as such is a sort of structural violence that makes Mariam a *harami*, restricting her social positions and belonging. She is in between worlds: she is a child of a biological father but one who does not have a legal father to rely upon. This indecision puts her in the world of exploitation and non-acceptance since she is not integrated in a family nor is she isolated completely.

The suicide of Nana is a point of departure in the psychological life of Mariam. "A gust of wind blew and parted the drooping branches of the weeping willow like a curtain, and Mariam caught a glimpse of what was beneath the tree: the straight-backed chair, overturned. The rope dropping from a high branch. Nana dangling at the end of it" (Hosseini 36). The suicide of Nana shows that when it happened Mariam could not

process it completely but later it haunts her throughout her life. This shows that trauma is not fully assimilated when it occurs but remains as unclaimed. The death of Nana frequently possesses Mariam, affecting her decisions and her speculations that she deserves punishment. This situation can be explained with the notion of belatedness suggested by Caruth: trauma operates through delayed recognition as an “unclaimed experience” where “The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.” (Caruth 4).

The domestic sphere becomes a battlefield when Mariam marries Rasheed at fifteen. The new setting is full of violence, unpredictability, and threats. Rasheed attributes his failures to Mariam, escalates physical abuse, and uses reproductive trauma to dominate her. The concept of acting out of La Capra shows that Mariam is forced to re-enact unresolved trauma by repeatedly humiliating herself rather than distancing from it. The most agonizing scene is when Rasheed makes her chew pebbles and he makes her normal food a torture. This scene shows the compulsive repetition of trauma. This sadistic dominance deprives her of her free will and makes her internalize the self-hate of the abuser.

The silence of Mariam in the novel may be regarded as a sign of resistance and survival. Silence helps her to protect herself from years of physical abuse, humiliation and from further psychological harm. It is also indicative of a larger cultural move to underreport or deny domestic violence, since Afghanistan has social and legal limitations. The introduction of Laila into the scene is a significant development; this friendship has turned into a source of healing and a slow process to reclaim a sense of agency. When Mariam tries to save Laila by killing Rasheed, it clearly shows a break from her suffering and trauma.

The Personal Loss and Trauma of Laila

The story of the personal life of Laila is set in the background of war, displacement, and gendered violence, and it demonstrates that no victim experience could be entirely representative of the Afghan society. Laila, unlike Mariam, is born with loving parents, education, and goals in life. War cruelly interrupts her path and it turns out to be the fact that war can ruin dreams and horizons without any physical harm. Her parents are killed in a rocket attack, “The rocket that destroys Laila's house and kills her parents comes as they prepare to flee Kabul... Her thoughts are interrupted by screams, followed by an explosion” (Hosseini 152). This is an incident of trauma which is not fully processed when it occurred. Cathy Caruth referred to this as an unclaimed trauma, “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 returns to haunt the survivor later on.” (4). As Laila couldn't process it immediately. Later haunts her through guilt, emotional disorientation and a fractured sense of self. The loss of her parents also influences Laila's choices which shows that trauma is not simply discovered in the original events but also in persisting, later impacts on the survivor's life.

Laila somehow manages to save herself, but is psychologically devastated, and bears the guilt of a survivor which is a common condition in the post-traumatic stress and numbs the pleasure of living after the loss. “I should have died in the house with my mother” (Hosseini 167) reflects the burden of survival that overwhelms her and the silence of Mariam accentuates the hardness of describing such loss. Herman in her description of traumatic loss describes numbness and disconnection that may ensure that the survivors are

unable to feel pleasure or engage in relationships and attachments with others. This reflects in Laila's life after the death of her parents; she separates from her family and cultural continuity and also pride which leaves her groundless. This illustrates how traumatic loss impacts not only memory but also survivor's ability to live in the present.

The scenario is worsened by the presence of Rasheed and Mariam, as it compounds another level of oppression in the household. This is an example of how war may lead women to further exploitation. Laila is dragged into a marriage that would only save her from the burden of decisions that could bring her starvation, homelessness and sexual exploitation. The false news of Tariq's death is a psychological divide, forcing Laila into submission. The agency of Laila is not long; at the time when Aziza is born, she momentarily feels that she may get away. However, "Rasheed was so disappointed when he saw that Laila gave birth to a girl" (Hosseini 194) demonstrates that patriarchal society values women only through male descendants.

The passion Laila develops towards Aziza is her means of struggle as it provides her with short glimpses of light in the face of oppression. When the Taliban take control, the public and private streets become the sites of terror. Women are made to become invisible and violence is also justified in terms of religion. Judith Herman would interpret this to be chronic trauma embedded within daily life, as there are restrictions on movements, refusal of medical care and threats of punishments. The fact that Laila is punished by making her visit Aziza at an orphanage is an indication that her punishment by the state becomes intertwined with domestic oppression. The way female body turns into theatre of political sadism is revealed in her caesarean delivery of Zalmai (without anaesthesia) and the deprivation of medical care proves the inhumanity, the way women were treated during Taliban regime.

Tariq's return makes Laila start her remembrance and reconnection, the process defined by Judith Herman as Laila is forced to confront the lies that shaped her sufferings. The fact that Rasheed was murdered by Mariam brings in anger and defiance, which fits perfectly with the concept of LaCapra that one should work through the trauma and not remain in the loop. When the Taliban government falls, Laila goes back to Kabul and chooses to restore her life by educating and taking care of people. This shows transformation from individual survival to ethical responsibility. However, that Laila is no longer a survivor. She nourishes, heals and transforms her loss into public healing, and this is a tribute to those who are denied the chance to live their lives before they could reclaim their future.

Recovery, Trauma and Healing: Journey of Mariam and Laila

The disintegration of family further escalates when Rasheed forcibly isolates Aziza from her parents due to food shortage, a bitter aspect of war which shows rupture of maternal bonds. Laila is terrorized day after day, she is also raped by Taliban guards on her way to meet her daughter. When she visits Aziza alone in the orphanage, she sometimes gets caught and beats up by the soldiers. These acts of violence become retaliations, a literal denial of remote violence. Laila's body is used by political authorities as a site to impose obedience and shows how state violence reflects domestic oppression. Whether it is the daily terror or not, the bodies of women are battlegrounds where the state violence and domestic oppression intertwine.

On the day that Tariq comes back, Laila realizes that she is being forced to unravel the lie and her unresolved trauma. She goes through the stages of recovery of Judith Herman's remembrance, mourning and reconnection. Laila remembers her losses and the manipulation after the years of being forced to live in enforced silence and fear. This realization allows her grieve not only for Tariq but also for the life which was ruptured by war. Judith Herman also highlights that healing is not merely survival but an attempt towards new engagements with life. Taking defeat and new dreams of life after the siege are her new values. Therefore, Laila's struggle for freedom implies psychological shift which shows trauma is recognized and mourned.

Once the Taliban is overthrown, Laila goes back to Kabul to spend some time in the orphanage and chooses to work where Aziza used to live. "Tariq and Laila are helping to renovate the orphanage... Laila teaches at the school there... Some of the other children call her 'Mother'" (Hosseini 455–456). This illustrates Laila's recovery and transforms her survival into ethical responsibility. Lastly, Laila is no longer in her suffering, she educates, raises, and heals the world. Her working in orphanage illustrates a change from personal safety to communal healing. Her relationship with Mariam demonstrates that verbal articulations are not always needed; emotional witnessing, shared endurance and presence have a great impact when it comes to healing.

Defiance is achieved when Mariam decides to murder Rasheed and follows through on her plan, making her years of being oppressed into one decisive act of resistance. As LaCapra explains: "Working through is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma, one is able to distinguish between past and present" (Lacapa 78). According to Lacapa, healing requires an intentional approach to trauma that allows the survivor to understand it as an event that happened in the past rather than a state continuously repeating. Mariam's life with Rasheed depicts what Lacapa states as 'acting out', a recurrence of past abandonment. When Mariam chooses to save Laila at her own expense, she turns out to be a witness and not just a silenced victim. When Mariam dies, her memory and legacy are carried forward by Laila, who faced the last step to recovery, a reintegration into society and a post-trauma mission. Laila is pregnant when the novel ends and she even thinks of naming her daughter Mariam, as it signifies that Mariam's sacrifice will not be forgotten, rather it will become a generative story that will inspire the future generations.

Conclusion

Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* talks about personal experiences, even though it is filled with philosophy and history. The novel depicts the history and culture of Afghanistan and the social situation in the 1960s to early 2000s. Through war and conflicts, the novel documents how the cultural, social, and political system may result in degradation, inhumanity, and violence in both public and private spheres. Moreover, the novel tells us about two heroic females, Laila and Mariam, who are repressed in a male-dominated society. Their life depicts personal impacts of war. They rebel against the suppressive power structures, show female strength, and gain self-esteem.

The concepts related to trauma like acting out and working through safety and recollection, collective wounds, and witnessing, explains how individual wounds are transformed by historical tragedy. The collision

of ideologies is displayed on the bodies of women and the wars, coups, and change of regimes that disfigure Afghanistan, reflect the gendered violence that Mariam and Laila are forced to face.

Mariam's story begins with a stigma of the illegitimacy. With the death of Nana and Rasheed's emotional and physical abuse it is intensified. Mariam understands that she does not have a place in a selfish world after the death of her mother Nana. She lives in silence for so many years but her silence develops into moral strength. The resilience to her illegitimacy and self-sacrifice transforms her sufferings into ethical agency.

The story of Laila on the contrary starts with a relatively happy life, education, and hope but is ruined by the war and her parents, and future. She is a victim as she is forcibly married and faces domestic violence. By taking the life of Rasheed to save Laila, Mariam takes charge of her story and challenges the asymmetries of gender by making the sacrifice and being aware of it. Laila transforms her personal loss into collective memory and healing when she goes back to Kabul to rebuild the orphanage. Naming her daughter Mariam shows that remembrance will continue instead of closure. Therefore, Trauma is transformed into memory, resistance and survival.

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