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## **TESTIMONY OF TRAUMA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE PROTAGONISTS OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY, WILLIAM FAULKNER AND VIRGINIA WOOLF**

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### **Abstract**

The research paper institutes a comparative study to explore the nature of mentally sick and wounded characters of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. The psychoanalytical theory of trauma of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth has been applied to compare the psychological trajectories of the protagonists of the selected novels: *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Light in August* (1932), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Light House* (1927). The selected novels are compared firstly from the aspect of the same reason for trauma that is war, leading to various negative consequences on the lives of different victims. Secondly, the novels are compared focusing on the various impacts of the American culture after World War I on the mind and sensibility of the

characters. Thirdly, the novels are contrasted concentrating on the reasons that lead to various mental disorders like anxiety, dissociation of self, trauma, manic depression etc. Fourthly in the last part of the comparison, it has been discussed how the victims revivify their traumatic past experiences.

**Keyword:** anxiety,trajectories, trauma,manic depression and wounded.

### **Introduction**

The novels of Ernest Hemingway deal with the war trauma. The psychic pressure that the victims bear, leads to post traumatic stress disorder. The main focus of Hemingway is to examine the symptoms and problems of the characters leading to the disintegration of self of the characters. The novels of William Faulkner deal with cultural trauma. Faulkner discusses the loss of the old glamour and glory of the South in his novels. The characters feel traumatized because the values they inherit from their forefathers, no longer exist and with the emergence of new culture there is one thing that prevails is confusion. The novels of Virginia Woolf deal with the psychological trauma of the post War England when many soldiers were killed and wounded. Mrs. Dalloway suffers the inner emptiness because of the impotency of her husband and she leads an artificial life suffering from mental problems. Septimus is a mental wreck, all the time he is surrounded by war memories. He suffers from hallucinations.

**Traumatic Journey of the Protagonists of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf**

The first criterion for comparing the selected novels is that the same reason for trauma creates various negative consequences for the different victims. For instance, Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley in *The Sun also Rises* and Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway* are the victims of war trauma, but the consequences of war trauma are quite different for these victims. Jake serves in the Army, while fighting in the war; he suffers an injury that leaves him impotent. His inability to sexually fulfill Brett causes her to reject him. He demonstrates the first key feature of dissociation of self with his pained recollection of terrifying wartime experiences. "My head started to work, the old grievance. Well, it was a rotten way to be wounded and flying on a joke front like the Italian"(Hemingway 31). Freud asserts "hysterics suffers mainly from reminiscences" (Freud 85). He remains sleepless being haunted by the traumatic war experiences; his sterility is physical since he got a genital wound during the Great War. He remembers that horrible time when for six months "I never slept with the light off" (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 108). Trauma settles in his memory forever. Cathy Caruth also discovers that to overcome original traumatic experience is extremely challenging. Traumatized victims hardly adopt new experiences and environments in their lives. Caruth states, "Traumatized individuals . . . develop difficulties in assimilating subsequent experiences as well. . ." (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 164). He moves from one place to another to get rid from the traumatic memories and to lower the fear, anxiety and shame. He represses his feelings as a lover for Brett and act as her pimp highlighting his sexual

impotency. On surface Jake Barnes is walking, dancing, fishing, drinking and enjoying but inwardly look sterile and neurotic. He is cut off from the society as he feels disconnected from world the around. He doesn't find life charming and worth living. He is living far away from his home in Paris. Jake becomes alcoholic. He performs several roles; he prays labors, suffers and loves passionately and goes through act of purgation. He takes up several professions to numb his tortured mind like soldier, journalist and buffer etc but realizes in the end that drinking and dancing is just a futile distraction, and purposeless activity. He tells Cohn: "you can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another" (*The Sun Also Rises* 72). "Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival," argues Cathy Caruth (*Unclaimed Experiences* 99). Jake struggles in his life to survive but he knows that he is helpless and there is nothing he can do about his disability.

### **Wounded Self of Brett Ashley:**

As a nurse during World War I, Brett witnessed gruesome, fatal injuries. During this time, she also lost her true love. Then, she married a man suffering from what can now be labeled as post-traumatic stress disorder. Brett's ex-husband, Lord Ashley, continually threatens her life when they are married: as Mike, Brett's fiancé, tells their friends, the war veteran Lord Ashley, "was a sailor, you know. When he came home he wouldn't sleep in a bed. Always made Brett sleep on the floor. Finally, when he got really bad, he used to tell her he'd kill her. Always slept with a loaded service revolver.

Brett used to take the shells out when he'd gone to sleep." The events that Mike discusses exemplify that Brett has experienced domestic violence, including verbal abuse and most likely physical abuse. These events convey the underlying trauma from which she suffers. Susan J. Brison defines a traumatic event as "one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening."

She develops androgynous characteristics in order to salvage her identity, thus changing our understanding of her from a "mannish," sex-starved "bitch" to a survivor in need of compassion.

Martin presents Brett as a modern woman, who assumes a more empowered role and ignores gender binaries. Brett attempts to cope with the trauma when she has casual sex and avoids commitment. The violence that Brett bears mars her ideas about relationships, her self-worth, and her agency.

She rebuilds her identity. She neither looks like a lady nor acts with socially acceptable manners. Jake, Brett's impotent love interest, notes her appearance: "her hair was brushed back like a boy's. She started all that. She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht." In addition to a boy's haircut, she smokes cigarettes, wears hats and does not wear stockings<sup>[xii]</sup>—behavior associated with men. For Brett, her appearance represents her freedom from "culturally-defined categories" and freedom from men's control. Brett freely chooses to reject traditional gender roles. By destabilizing the differences between men and women, Brett makes sure that neither gender

has absolute authority over the other, nor no one can place her in the position of a victim again.

Brett refuses to accept her place as sexual object. When Brett meets men, she turns into the voyeur, objectifying the opposite sex. For instance, when she sees the handsome bullfighter, Pedro Romero, she reveals her sexual attraction for him: “My God! He’s a lovely boy . . . And how I would love to see him get into those clothes.”<sup>[xvi]</sup> Brett appropriates the male gaze, turning it on Romero and thinking about him undressed. Accordingly, Brett acts with a man’s authority, continuing to break down gender binaries.

### **Traumatic Self of Septimus**

The next victim of war trauma is Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Septimus is a poet and veteran from the First World War who married an Italian girl named Lucrezia. Septimus is a special case because he shows symptoms of many mental disorders such as shellshock, manic depression, anxiety or depressions combined with each other. Septimus Smith is a shell shocked person. He suffers from strange feelings caused by terrifying experience from the war. This fear or feeling can be, from the psychological point of view, called aforesaid Shell shock. Even from the Woolf’s description we can reveal that Septimus is not in complete mental balance:

Septimus Warren Smith, aged about thirty pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby coat, with hazel eyes which had that look of

apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where will it descend ? (19)

Septimus is highly skeptical about the entire world. He has a tendency to judge people and that he sees only bad ones. This tendency is typical for people suffering from depression because their self-esteem is low therefore they see no good in other people. He does not believe that people are good or that they could help him:

For the truth is that human beings have neither kindness, nor faith, nor charity beyond what serves to increase the pleasure of the moment. They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen. They are plastered over with grimaces. (97)

Septimus' relation towards doctors can be described as negative and even hateful. He distrusts them because they do not help him at all. His doctor, Mr. Holmes, did not recognize symptoms of his illness. Doctor Holmes calms Rezia by saying that Septimus is completely all right and that there is nothing what he would lack. She is not aware of the real illness threatening her husband even if he is predicting his suicide as Septimus says, "I will kill myself; an awful thing to say" (20). Fallacies and delusions are also perceived as one of frequent symptoms of this mental illness. This sign is typical for Septimus because he sees things that are not real as "He said people were talking behind the bedroom walls. He saw things too...he had seen an old woman's head in the middle of a fern (*Mrs. Dalloway* 73).

Sometimes his visions are terrifying: “Skye terrier snuffed his trousers and he started in an agony of fear. It was turning into a man! He could not watch it happen! It was horrible, terrible to see a dog become a man!... Why could he see through bodies, see into future, when dogs will become men” (75). Septimus is also persuaded that he saw a friend of his named Evans. That was only an illusion because Officer Evans died just before the end of World War I and Septimus was a witness of it. Septimus was not able to admit that Evans was dead. Furthermore, he even talks to him. Septimus is highly traumatized by the deaths he has witnessed. Therefore he often communicates with dead Evans. Septimus’ fantasy and hallucinations are very vivid. He feels threatened by his phantom. It may be attributed to the fact that he underwent horrifying events during the war and that his memories are unforgettable. The flashbacks from the war hunt him still but sometimes he is not willing to admit it. Tracing the psychological journey of Jake Barnes, Brett Ashley and Septimus it is found that Jake who is a brave soldier transforms into a pimp, Brett who is a devoted beloved becomes sexual bitch and Septimus who is war hero transforms into a mental wreck.

It has been observed that the traumatized victims from the selected novels retort differently though the disturbing factor remains the same. Anne T. Romano writes that various traumatic incidents and varying stress create varying degree of intensity of trauma for the victims. Romano records, “Because of varying degree of stress precipitated by the different types of incidents, the intensity of the trauma will vary from incident to incident, as



well as from person to person” (Romano 70). The present study has found that the different traumatized victims react variedly though the reason for their trauma is the same. Secondly, the victims suffer interminably due to the repetitive occurrence or reminiscence of traumatic events. It has been discovered in the above analysis that, though the reason for trauma is the same for the three victims, the corollaries are quite different. Furthermore, not only does trauma become a part of their memories and selves, it makes irrevocable changes in their personalities. The protagonists bear different mental problems as Jake suffers from dissociation of self, Septimus suffers from manic depression and Brett is a traumatic figure because of her hellish experience of life. Brett struggles with physiological symptoms of trauma. Whenever she encounters stress, she “freezes,” and she conveys this response in her eyes. When they take a taxi ride, Jake remarks, “Brett looked straight ahead”(42). Brett’s reaction is a common response for trauma survivors, which Bessel A. Van der Kolk explains further: “Freezing/numbing responses may serve the function of allowing organisms not to ‘consciously experience’ or not to remember situations of overwhelming stress (which would also keep them from learning from experience)”(xxiii). Brett must save herself by expelling these negative influences in her life.

The second criterion to compare the selected novels is to probe and compare the impact of American culture on psyche of the characters. The study traces the fact that the culture in America after World War I puts adverse impact on the characters of Faulkner as Quentin’s resistance to change

causes him mental breakdown as he wants to remain stick to his old values. His obsessive anxiety deepens and grows worse with time as he commits suicide at the end of the novel. Quentin cannot live without his values inherited from his ancestors of the Old South and this linkage causes him trauma. He is not ready to change himself, the way the world is changing. The loss of Caddy's virginity is engraved in his psyche a deep wound. Caddy has incestuous relationship with Dalton and she becomes pregnant, this compels Quentin to end his life. The problem with Quentin is that he fails to strike a balance between his idealism and the reality of the external life. Quentin's main concern is not human related but of the abstract objects of virginity, virtue, pride and honor. He refuses to accept reality and fails to understand the force of natural impulses that drove Caddy to promiscuity. He thinks as he is not fit in the new world that has been drastically changed and commits suicide.

On the other hand Brett accepts changes whole heartedly and flouts all traditional norms. Actually she maintains dignity by celebrating those elements of the past that are worth honoring, and making it clear that the world has changed. She keeps some values of her own culture while aspiring to open up to the outside world. Her self confidence sets an example for other women as she believes that woman is no longer a puppet in the hands of man. Like men, she has short hair, wears masculine clothes and enjoys hard drinking. She rejects the traditional assumption that woman is destined for procreation as she says: "I'm not going to be one of these bitches that ruin children" (93). The culture after World War I has a positive impact on Brett as she uses the

modern way of living as a therapy to overcome her bitter past memories . She keeps herself busy in parties, clubs, drinking, smoking and sexual intercourse so as to avoid the disgusted feeling of trauma.

The thing that connects the protagonists of the selected novels in a common string is the mental pain they experienced as they all are involved in a conflict with the outside world and inner anxiety but they deal with their mental pain with different coping strategies. Freud advocates the idea that individual experiences a severe trauma may find it easier to dissociate and move away from self as a means of coping. Brett tries three therapies to overcome her depression; first romantic love and sexuality; second the wine; and the third smoking and drinking fearlessly. The critics call “her nymphomaniac, a drunk, a bitch and a Circe who turns men into swine” (159). Brett has an experience of two broken marriages and this is why she keeps relationships casual and short, including her flings with Robert Cohn, one of Jake’s friends and Romero. Accordingly, Brett assumes control, rather than having a man control her. She deliberately avoids situations that will place her in danger. Brett takes the necessary measures to stop the past from repeating itself. Jake tries to escape from the boredom of life by passing his time in cafes and fishing or by watching bull fights in Spain. Clarissa keeps herself busy in parties, cooking and shopping to avoid her past memories.

The another criterion to compare the selected novels is on the basis of the reasons and factors that lead to psychosis that further lead to trauma, anxiety, manic depression, death drive, and dissociation of self of characters.

Apart from the reasons which are discussed earlier and which are common in the selected novels, there are a number of factors which lead to psychosis. Catherine is mentally disturbed because she has lost her lover in the war. Joe becomes black devil due to the racial discrimination caused by society as he hates black color which reminds him of his Negro identity. Jake becomes mental wreck due to his impotency caused by war. Quentin cause of mental breakdowns lies in his loss of cultural values. Clarissa mental agony lies in her husband inability to satisfy her sexual needs. Thus all the characters of the selected novels suffer mental torture due various reasons which leads to other psychological problems.

The last criterion for comparing the selected novels is the resuscitation of the past experiences of traumatized victims. In this part of the comparison, it is analyzed how the victims revivify their upsetting old memories. In *The Sun also Rises*, there are traumatized victims who also revivify their upsetting old experiences. Brett suffers anxiety when recalled her past events. When Jake asks she says: "Oh! Jake, please let's never talk about" (*The Sun Also Rises* 247). She feels disconnected from the world though she has numerous sexual relationships yet does not have any emotional attachment. She bitterly observes: "I had such a hell of happy life" (*The Sun Also Rises* 203). Cathy Caruth appropriately states that "trauma, in order to be psychic trauma, never comes simply from outside. That is, even in the first moment it must be internalized, and then afterwards relived, revived, in order to become an internal trauma" (Caruth, *Listening to Trauma* 26). Thus it has been noticed

that it is not a gender but a reaction that really traumatizes a subject. The repercussions of traumatic incidents can't be aborted. Whenever the victims of trauma undergo the new distressing experiences, the old exposures get refreshed in the same form or sometimes in the ductile forms. Moreover, Cathy Caruth records that the "flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event and the truth of its incomprehensibility" (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 153). Flashbacks reveal the truth contained in the primary traumatic incidents, and they also unfold the hidden mysteries if a victim fails to grasp them during the first encounter. It has been noticed that the red color of roses reminds Septimus the blood of human being at the battlefield. So is the case of Catherine who has witnessed the death of her lover. This is the obvious impact of trauma that Catherine fails to get rid of his traumatic past. She remains absorbed in her past psychic disturbance. The distressing death of her lover gets absorbed in her psyche and haunts her alternatively and concomitantly. Her trauma can be experienced through her fear of rain. Catherine says: "I'm afraid of rain because sometimes I see me dead in it and sometimes I see you dead in it". She suffers from hallucination as she sometimes sees herself and Frederic dead in the rain. The protagonists of these novelists revivify their traumatic past experiences, and become the victims of repetitive trauma.

### **Conclusion**

The present study has found that even the same reason for trauma creates dissimilar fallout for different victims of trauma; no matter, the victims

are from the same novel or from the different novels. It has also been explored that trauma emerges because of different reasons like death of loved ones, bloodshed, brutal killings; racial discriminations disruption of old values broken families and broken relationships etc. Secondly, it has also been found that not only personal experience and context lead to different repercussions of trauma, but also an unchanged reason can create dissimilar corollaries in the light of different individual reactions to the traumatic event. It has been concluded that an unchanged reason for trauma leads to various repercussions on the lives of different traumatized victims. Finally, it has been explored that traumatized victims revivify the traumatic old incidents which were experienced either by themselves or by their ancestors in the wake of subsequent traumatic incidents.

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