



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trauma studies: The framework of trauma as a performative phenomenon in *The Fly*

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Abstract

From Freud's concept of hysteria to the now-blooming field of trauma studies, the subject of psychological complexity has always been a distinctive topic for research. Various literary works illustrate subjects like anxiety, trauma, disorder, cognitive complexity, mental suffering, etc. This paper specifically focuses on the trauma theory and how the protagonist in the short story *The Fly* by Katherine Mansfield undergoes the traumatic event by centralizing the fact that trauma is inescapable and out of time and space, emphasizing the meticulous symbolism and narrative techniques displayed by the writer in the story. Because of this psychological disruption, identity and the self are fragmented, and external affairs and surroundings affect the world within, which destroys the normal psychological status, realm, and functioning of an individual, resulting in a loss of both psychological and emotional agencies. The study also examines the very psychological nexus between trauma, traumatic experiences, and their portrayal in the fiction with the help of the character (protagonist) from the short story that has been selected for the present study. The short story has a direct reference to the post-war trauma and how the families of the victims deliberately recreate the site of trauma to experience the pain and agony, which, in the Freudian reference, is called compulsive repetition of the suppressed emotions.

Keywords: Trauma, Psychology, Complexity, Cognitive Disruption, Fragmentation.

关键词: 创伤、心理学、复杂性、认知中断、碎片化。

Introduction

The discourse of trauma studies has widely diversified today as the generation of humans living in this era has become traumatic due to the immense growth and development of society, which has changed the living standards, actions, and habits of humans, leading to various shifts in psychological patterns at individual and social levels. The word "trauma" in

its literal sense is perceived as a wound, a physical or bodily wound, as per the traditional understanding of the term. Today, it would be rather insulting to limit the word to its traditional notional meaning. Extending the understanding of the term, it is now mostly referred to as a psychological wound and cognitive suffering, which is certainly very negative in nature. Trauma, in order to define it, is a very distinctive and unique kind of psychological happening that is basically very adverse. According to Sütterlin (2020), it was believed in the ancient medieval period that if a person suffered a head or brain injury or had any kind of mental disorder that is very much visible in the behavioural pattern, then the consensus was that the individual is possessed, naming such individuals as "madmen". Often, the treatment for this was physical coercion, torture, and many other mythical and superstitious practices. (Crownshaw, R., 2013) Very recently, it was defined that mental disorders are related to psychological, cognitive, neurotic, and psychotic reasons.

Taking the concept of trauma even further in history, then, it would not be wrong to say that the existence of trauma can be traced to the formation of the world and the creation of humans. The religious scriptures, the Greek mythologies, and the historico-religious events can be taken as the best evidence for it. The fall of man in the Bible describes trauma. Very evidently, it can be said that

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after disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit, when Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden, they had regret for the act and its consequences by then. This would not have been seen physically, but the sense of remorse shows the psychological strike and also shows that they were traumatized due to their action, which led them to psychological suffering and disruption. Even before this Biblical incident occurred, diving deeper into the Biblical history (Old Testament), when Lucifer and the fallen angels were defeated and thrown into the fiery lake, they went through the trauma of hell. Even in the New Testament, Jesus Christ, when crucified, went through physical, psychological, emotional, and even spiritual trauma. It is depicted in the lines of the Good News Bible, book of Luke, chapter 22, verse 44: "In great anguish, he [Jesus] prayed even more fervently; his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." Even the famous Puritan poet John Milton has described in his *Magnum Opus Paradise Lost*, and on a deeper analysis of the text, it is found that trauma existed before the creation of the first human, Adam and Eve. Due to the sin committed by Lucifer in the Heaven, he was thrown, but before that Lucifer along with his supports protested against the God and there took place a war in the Heaven (Davis, C., & Meretoja, H., 2020) This war and the protest of the condemned angels is the result of the trauma which, in the case of Lucifer is raised due to Hubris or pride. So, trauma started to exist before the human body and mind were created by God.

The pictorial representation of the physical expression of pain of Adam and Eve after the event of disobeying God, as reflected in the single-scene painting entitled *Fresco* by the Italian Renaissance artist Masaccio, shows trauma that emerged out of their psychological domain. Lucifer, after landing in hell, also portrays the confused, baffled state of mind, and cognitive disruption and abnormal psychological apparatus, which clearly can be defined as trauma. Although Lucifer was not a biological human, he was a spirit, but the conversation displayed in the Bible and also in Milton's poem, clearly shows the stress, anxiety, shock, and trauma he was going through. This can also be referred to as a mystical or transcendental trauma. Hence, the nature of trauma and its effects is not limited to humans only. It is an abstract phenomenon.

Today, the discourse of trauma studies is considered interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary, not limited only to literature. However, trauma studies in literature poke at many other concepts and theories like poststructuralism, existentialism, identity and memory, interstitial identity and crisis, eternal recurrence, etc. The emotions attached to trauma are fear, terror, paranoia, loss, detachment, denial, shock, shame, guilt, and rejection, which make it a very complex entity. At the same time, trauma is perceived to be a psychological, cognitive, behavioural, and emotional reaction to an unpleasant and unexpected, as well as unaccepted, external event. Most often, these experiences

are unable to be represented in words or speech, and thereby, literature inquires about this lack or void in the verbal or written portrayal of the traumatic events. It is argued that it is difficult to present trauma in words or in reality, but the irony that joins this notion is that once the trauma is 'spoken', it loses its fundamental trait of being traumatic, as now it cannot be unspeakable any longer. Thus, it questions the idea of a temporal-linguistic gap in representing trauma. Literature delves into how trauma shapes individuals, culture, society, identity, virtues, vices, morals, ethics, memory, gender, and religion, and affects these same aspects comprehensively.

Aim if the Study

The research aims at understanding the discourse of trauma studies with the help of the psychological reaction of the characters of the text to analyse the psychological breakdown, its causes and the coping mechanism simultaneously.

Objectives

- To understand the trauma models provided by the Western theorists to analyse the need to build a modern and contemporary coping mechanism,
- To evaluate the psychological functioning of the characters and their way to overcome the adverse experience,
- To reconsider the effects of the post-war trauma on the victims and their families from a newer perspective,
- To find the nexus between human nature, trauma, and memory and in what ways they play a role in generating and pacifying trauma.

Research Questions

- How does the text depict the post-war trauma parallel to the symbolism within its narrative strategies?
- In what ways, the narrative reflect the collective psychological and emotional breakdown of the families of the victims of World War 1?
- How does the author challenge the effectiveness of memorisation and traumatising in the post-war English society?
- In what ways, the text reveals the act human act of remembering and forgetting as a biological and psychological phenomenon in the face of trauma?

Methodology

The research is purely on a text-based analysis of the theoretical understanding of the discourse of trauma studies from a literary lens. It is a desk or library research with applying the theory of trauma studies on the selected text to provide an alternative way for coping mechanisms. It also covers the views of the critic and theorist to analyse the trauma and the models of trauma with an attempt to add new knowledge into the discipline of trauma studies

and widen the scope of the same from a literary standpoint. A rigorous literature review and opinions of the traditional trauma theorists and the contemporary ones are also conducted and reviewed. Thus, the research becomes a closed analysis of the text with the practical implementation of the theory on the text to interpret the functions of the human psychological domain. Hence, the research is an interdisciplinary one, involving the disciplines of literature and psychology, with the specific theories of trauma studies, memory studies, and war narratives.

The Contrasting Qualities of the Characters

The short story of Mansfield is set against the backdrop of the First World War and deals with the psychological trauma of the characters present in the story. Visibly, the story has three characters: Mr. Woodifield, the boss, and the office boy Macey. Apart from them, there are other absent characters who are merely mentioned in the narrative. There is also the idea of an absent female in the story. There are no direct female characters in the story; there are only some scattered references to Woodifield's wife and daughters. The story primarily revolves around the boss, displaying his unclaimed psychological trauma, making him the traumatizing protagonist of the story. The locale of the story is the lavish office of the boss, and it begins with a mundane conversation between the boss and his friend Woodifield. The author has used an anti-linear style of narration, where the plot oscillates between a couple of time frames, back and forth in the past and present, and between two different countries. Apart from this, the technique of rhetorical silence has been greatly emphasized by the author. Trauma in this story is represented as a Performative category, as the boss literally tries to perform trauma on himself. A strange kind of notion is reflected in the narrative where the boss is the owner of his trauma; this, in a sense, shows the "bubble pride" of the boss or "hubris" as if he is the proprietor of some privileged possession. The abstract entity (pride) is seen to be materialized, and trauma becomes a sort of commodity that is concretized as the boss wants to perform/consume trauma. Normally, trauma is associated with loss and unpleasantness, but ironically, here it is about ownership. Therefore, trauma becomes an individual choice in the story, whether to accept it or to deny it. Moreover, a unique kind of violence is enacted in the story; it is not direct physical violence but indirect psychological and emotional violence.

The writer also creates a symbolic identity crisis and void by not giving a normal name to the protagonist; throughout the story, he is simply referred to as the boss, creating a question about his real identity. On the contrary, by doing so, the writer presents him as a representative of the hegemonic masculine male, and this diction of not naming the character generates the universality of the traumatic protagonist or characters, also genderizing trauma. The story also shows

an odd connection between masculinity and mournability, as the grieving subject (the boss) is male.

In contrast to the boss's character, Mr. Woodifield's character and persona are described as very docile, weak, and infantilizing. On the one hand, the boss is the marker of dominant male masculinity, but on the other, Woodifield is totally opposite to him. He is taken care of by his wife and daughters, and they decide his appearance and lifestyle, even when he should go out of the house, what he should wear, etc. In the very beginning sentence of the story: "Y are very snug in here, piped old Mr. Woodifield, and he peered out of the great, green-leather armchair by his friend the boss's desk as a baby peers out of its pram." Mansfield (1923) sketches a childlike image of Woodifield, making him infantilizing. Woodifield is "boxed up" in the house as a child is mostly kept in the house under the supervision of the parents. He suffered a stroke, which shows a psychological medical condition, but it has more affected the physical well-being of Woodifield. Thus, Woodifield metaphorically becomes the marker of a paralyzed male, and the boss is the traumatized male in the story. Both are totally different in their personalities as well as in their medical health status. The microcosmic movements in the story have many symbolic meanings. For instance, the boss is reading the Financial Times, which is a business newspaper denoting masculinity. The story was written at a time when women had very limited access to such things. The newspaper symbolizes male dominance, and the boss is a capitalist. The boss also likes when the old Woodifield admires his health and his office, and he takes pride in it. This also shows that the boss likes to take ownership of everything, enjoys being praised and being a cynosure. His pride for materialism can be seen when he brags off by showing the new possessions of his office to Woodifield. The boss likes to be superior to Woodifield.

Among all the new and prideful possessions of the boss, there is an old photograph of his son kept on his desk, which the boss does not like to point out. The photograph is of his dead son, who served in the army; due to this, the photograph becomes a marker of a traumatic object. The photograph, according to Mansfield (1923), is of a "grave-looking boy in uniform". The line is deliberately used by the author to give a traumatic meaning to the situation. Putting it another way, the image/picture of the person, who is alive in the photograph (when it was clicked) looks like as if he is dead or nearing death. Therefore, the intentional negative and dark word choice from the author's side is an example of the extended traumatic embodiment, which very gradually creates a traumatic aura in the background of the whole narrative. Further in the story, the boss mourns by looking at the same picture of his martyred son. So, the author has very skilfully traumatized the objects in the story. This photograph also stands as one of the many contrasting

elements of the story; unlike all the other objects in the background, this particular object is old; it has been on the desk for the past six years.

The Psychic Stroke

While using the technique of story-within-a-story, the author shows the moment when the traumatic past strikes, affecting the psychological state of the protagonist. After sharing a cup of whiskey with the boss, Woodifield narrates an instance that, later on, after Woodifield leaves, makes the boss extremely traumatized. The daughters of Woodifield travelled to Belgium to visit Reggie's (son of Woodifield) grave, who died in the war too, and they came across the grave of the boss's son. Here, a slight detour in the thematic pattern can be seen. The idea of trauma tourism comes into play. During the First and Second World Wars, people used to travel to the graves of their loved ones, particularly their sons who were martyred. By doing so, they try to perform trauma; they try to experience the trauma willingly. Mansfield (1923), on page number 77 says, in order to describe graveyard as a tourist site:

"The girls were delighted with the way the place is kept [...]. Beautifully looked after. Couldn't be better if they were at home [...]. There's miles of it, quavered old Woodifield, and it's all as neat as a garden. Flowers growing on all the graves. Nice broad paths."

The graveyard becomes the site of tourism, where death is beautified or commoditized. Fundamentally, the tomb is the symbol of mourning and trauma, but here it is converted into a touristic vista and a consumerist and commercial gaze.

After Woodifield's narration, the boss loses his attention; he is lost in his thoughts and he is unaware of the sentences he is uttering. After describing the incident, Woodifield leaves the office. This triggers the traumatic past/memory of the boss reviving the psychological and emotional wounds again. Therefore, in the words of Caruth, trauma is not considered trauma or traumatic at the time the event happens. The later recurrence, remembrance, and retrieval of the same thoughts and experiences bring psychological dissociation. Hence, trauma and the experience of trauma are not linear but circular, and they occur over and over again, making them an inescapable event. The boss stares into blankness for a long time after isolating himself. Hereafter, the story takes a crucial psychological turn. The narrative strategy of the author becomes very vivid at this point in time. In the view of Parui (2016), the anti-linear flow creates a sort of confusion that is visible in the characters, and the readers, at this point are not provided with all the information regarding the boss, which also arises a sense of detachment and doubt at the reader's end. Prior to the final stage of trauma, an individual passes through many sub-traumatic conditions, which is clearly noticeable through the character of the boss at this moment in the story.

The Psychological Collapse of the Protagonist in the Story

After the departure of Woodifield, the boss locks and isolates himself in his office by instructing the office boy, Macey, that he won't see anyone for the next half an hour. At this point in the story, the boss embraces the trauma by his own will and weeps at the death of his son. Hence, the reversal of action takes place, or, in Aristotelian words, a sort of peripatetic turn can be seen. Trauma, therefore, is narrated as a literal performative phenomenon something that can be performed anytime, like an activity (Heidarizadeh, N., 2015). The boss does not want to move on or forget the loss of his son; he wants himself to deliberately repeat and feel the past memory, psychological experience, and buried pain so that he can control and can have ownership of the trauma, commodifying and concretizing the experience of trauma. His refusal to forget the trauma and defiance of time make it a privileged act. The boss takes a retrospective view to perform and re-experience tragedy and trauma. It appears that the boss is taking 'manly' pride in his trauma by re-suffering it. The ability to be traumatized at will is equated with privilege, or rather, a masculine privilege. So the boss wants to hold on to the original moment of trauma, making him a mourner at will, a self-sufferer, and at the same time turning himself fragile. The manliness of the boss becomes very vulnerable, so the appearance versus the reality are at opposite ends. He attempts to be a masculine, archetypal male but at the other end he appears very anti-resilient and sensitive.

Hanson (2011) states, as the story turns out to be psychologically complex, the character of the boss is subhumanized to a certain degree. Amidst this, the story is also about the loss of humanity as it presents the dehumanizing picture of the war, questioning the whiteman's supremacy and toughness. The psychological collapse of the boss is also a very symbolic metaphor for the fall of the Western world, the authoritative malfunction of the West, and social nothingness. As the boss appeared to be strong and hegemonic, but turns out to be fragile, in the same manner, the Empire standing tall and strong, falls and fails during the war.

With the son being dead, the boss also becomes a "living dead". Due to this, the chain of command is permanently interrupted because the son will never become the next boss, so the idea and position of 'Boss' becomes essentially futile, and the concept of the archetypal patriarch becomes irrelevant. Thus, the story reaches a temporal crisis, the protagonist becomes futureless, and there is a strong defiance against time.

The action of weeping seems like the boss is singing a silent dirge in isolation; his words are like elegy. When the boss thinks of his son's grave, a very visual and graphic image is communicated by the author. When the boss historicizes

the event, he feels like the earth has torn apart, and he can see the body or corpse of his son lying down in the tomb, and the daughters of Woodfield gaze at him. In the opinion of Shrestha (2020), this symbolizes that the tomb is a traumatic site for the boss, but it becomes a touristic spectacle that is open to the public. The traumatic site, ironically, becomes a site of exhibition. This also portrays that the boss's masculinity and pride is compromised as the women are staring at his son, who is lying below their feet. The private ownership of his trauma becomes public, and people now have access to the cause of his mourning, which makes the boss psychologically very disturbed. He does not want to compromise with his grand patriarchal identity; therefore, the commercialization of his traumatic site makes him more restless than the idea of his son's death. His supremacy, identity, grand figure, manly personality, and masculine pride happen to be of the utmost priority to him.

The boss stares into blankness for a long time after isolating himself. Hereafter, the story reaches at the climax of psychological and traumatic complexity. The state of bewilderment is not only seen in the traumatic protagonist of the story, but also in Macey, the office boy who was in bafflement after observing the boss in the state or mental condition of nothingness. This is described in the story by Mansfield (1923) on page 79 as "For a long moment the Boss stayed, staring at nothing, while the grey-haired office messenger, watching him, dodged in and out of his cubby-hole like a dog that expects to be taken for a run". The Boss wants to re-enact the trauma and pain which he had experienced at the time of the death of his son to master the trauma. Out these multiple traumatic experiences, Boss feels a, in a paradoxical, oxymoronic way, sadistic pleasure. He also tries to commercialise the trauma and wants to own his trauma by portraying that the pain he is having comes with a price tag. He becomes the substitute of his son who has died in the war and an alternative victim of the trauma. This reflects the Boss' inability to go through trauma and his rigid mental disorder to hold on to a single event of his life for years and not want it to let go of it. The futility of his re-enactment is the symbolism of the futility of his life, he has left with no desire and ambition for his life after the death of his son.

Consequently, confusion creates anxiety, which leads to pain (both physical and mental), and the outcome is trauma. Thus, trauma is not a direct phenomenon but an embodiment of various other cognitive factors and disorders. The boss passes through various initial stages of pain and disruption before finally being traumatized completely. Memory and retrieval of the past are at the forefront of the cognitive domain before a person totally drowns in the ocean of trauma (Visser, I., 2011). It is hard for a person who has loss of memory or amnesia to experience trauma; memory is the first internal entity which plays

immense role in leading to the end result of an unclaimed adverse external experience called trauma.

Before the Boss feels completely traumatised, he goes through the stages of confusion, anxiety, and pain. These three emotions become stepping stones to trauma (Figure 1). The boss performs trauma deliberately; in other words, he performs the "ceremony" of trauma because he is seen making all the preparations before he weeps and mourns, like one makes all the arrangements before any ceremony or ritual. "He wanted, he intended, he had arranged to weep..." says Mansfield (1923) on page 79. This is also indicative that the boss wants to experience, in the words of Aristotle, the state of catharsis, but he is unable to do so. He wants to cry, but the tears are not flowing out of his eyes, which makes the whole tragic mourning of the boss into a tragic-comic situation. Here, the only difference, in the view of Feklistova (2020), is that the boss wants to have a selfish catharsis instead of a natural and realistic phenomenon of catharsis. This re-suffering of trauma gives him pride or Hubris, which gives him a bubble of satisfaction that he is a manly among men or the grand patriarch. Hence, the idea of trauma in this story becomes profoundly gendered as well as very pathological in quality and closely associated with masculinity and false pride, the pride that leads one to the lapsarian state or downfall. Mansfield (1923) by the line "Other men perhaps might recover, might live their loss down, but not he" on page 80, provides the obvious example of Hubris and pride in the character of Boss. The boss cannot be compared with other men; he considers himself the (most) manliest man, and other men are less masculine ('man') than him. The boss believes his trauma, personal grief, mourning, and loss are exceptional or unique, and so he does not want to live his loss down, which ironically suggests that by (re)living the trauma, he wants to celebrate his pride, his identity, and his grand loss, his patriarchal framework ad infinitum.

Subsequently, in a comic and allegoric way, the boss "carapaces" trauma. That means he encloses himself in a protective shell of grief to avoid reality, shame, judgments, and the acceptance of the present (Visser, I., 2014). By doing this or by carapacing, he develops the quality of

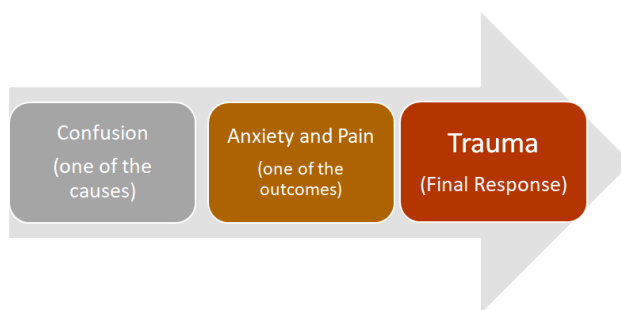


Figure 1: Three emotions as stepping stones to trauma

anti-resilience in him and refuses to adapt to the difficult and challenging events and experiences of life. He becomes psychologically and socially anti-resilient towards the situation and creates a symbolic, unusual stigmatic identity for himself.

The death of his son gives him meaninglessness not only in his life but also in his business and identity. The death has brought an end to his life and an end to his time, and thus he is also psychologically encountering a temporal and existential crisis. The time has stopped for him; he does not want to move on with the time but wants to hold on to his traumatic momentum. This defiance of time results in an apocalyptic state of mind, and he is now, in a way, developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by clinging to his tragedy. He had been living in a post-traumatic condition since he received the telegram informing him about the death of his son, which read, "Deeply regret to inform you...", described in the story by Mansfield (1923), a common template that was sent to the families of the demised or martyred ones. This also shows the brutality and absurdity of the war and the intensions of high-ranking officials who had no remorse for the loss. The template seems to be more like a business expression with a corporate-like detached tone, with a common, monotonous military diction having no value for patriotism. This remarks the vanity, futility, commercialization and magnification of the World War as a historic event. At the same time, it suggests a very symbolic collapse of the boss' empire and his ontological identity as a grand patriarch, as it disrupted the chain of command (because his son is no longer alive to take his place as the next boss). It is like a metaphor, that though he was not in the war, he is now having a similar experience of 'Shell Shock' because of the crash of temporality, crash of his capitalist and masculine empire, kingdom, and episteme, and this is the exact reason for his trauma. The metaphor is that the violence of war is not experienced only by the soldiers on the war front but by civilians as well.

This event brought the collapse of his false pride and identity that he is the grand patriarch; he can control time; he can control his emotions; he can control his mournability, pushing him into a psychological gloom and disturbing his normal cognitive apparatus. The boss also desires a traumatic trigger by mourning the event time and time again to feel the catharsis, and he is never satisfied with it (Rothberg, M., 2008). This gives an erotic feature to trauma as well as a very sadomasochistic attribute to it. For the boss, there's a pleasure component to trauma, which is sardonically in its nature, as he wants to have satisfaction out of grief, in a way as a person desired physical satisfaction after a sexual interval.

Mansfield by amalgamating the complexity of war and trauma describes that if, as an artist, one cannot describe the brutality of war and the trauma inserted by it, then it would be an artistic and literary treason. Moreover, she

combines the most sensitive issues of modern society, i.e., gender, trauma, and war, and claims that society is the embodiment of masculinity. Edwards (2017) supports the view of Mansfield by saying that an artist should use the artistic talent to voice the brutality and the ill practices of the society.

Conclusion

The story highlights the brutality of war and how war not only kills an individual but also agonizes and traumatizes the people who are connected to the martyrs. The story also places two sons and two fathers in the same shoe; both lost their sons, but one has totally moved on and the other still embraces the trauma in an intensified manner. For Woodfield, the death of his son is not important but, as a matter of fact, a trivializing thing. For the boss, on the other side, trauma becomes a perpetual personal entity and a life-long possession. It presents the different layers of trauma and how the human society can genderize trauma by making it a performative action.

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