



RESEARCH PAPER

Moving Towards Resilience: An Exploration of the Protagonist's Traumatic Experiences in 'Brown's Drinking From A Bitter Cup'

Sara Shahbaz¹ Abdul Rashid² Dr. Sarwat Jabeen³

1. Lecturer, Department of English, Women University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Lecturer in English, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Bahadur Sub Campus Layyah, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bahauddin Zakariya University Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: April 20, 2020	The literary works can be seen as a site for representing traumatic experiences and their consequences on individuals. The present study attempts to explore the traumatized consciousness of a ten years old girl, Sylvia in <i>Brown's Drinking From a Bitter Cup</i> (2014). For the textual analysis of the novel, the major theoretical insights have been taken from Salmona (2013) & Vickroy (2014) concepts of trauma. The findings of the study indicate that individuals from lower strata of society are easy prey to the victimization. Among such lower social strata, the women and children are easily exploited. Sylvia, the protagonist of the novel, is the incarnation of such social inequality and traumatization. She underwent situational trauma due to her mother's mental disorder and suicide afterwards. The demise of her father and the sexual advances of her step mother's brother Uncle Charles made her extremely distressed and anguished one. However, by the end of the novel, she recuperated from all these sufferings and decided to live with her baby. Thus, the study helps to explore the concept of trauma and its healing procedure by placing it in a larger context and cultural milieu
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Corresponding Author: Sarwat.awan4@gmail.com	

Introduction

The concept of trauma was proposed for the first time by Sigmund Freud in the 1890s. Initially, it bears psychological and emotional implications. Later on, the concept of trauma got representations and explorations in other fields such as psychology, history, literature, and cultural studies (Caruth, 1995). In the late twentieth century, there have been many theories proposed for the understanding of trauma in the modern age. Trauma can be defined as an intense event in which the victims are unable to respond adequately resulting in long-lasting effects in the psychical organization (Laplanche, 1974). Thus the notion of trauma becomes quite

significant for investigating the interconnections among social history, subjective experience, and cultural representation (Traverso, 2010)

The present study intends to explore the traumatic experiences of a ten years old black girl Sylvia in *Brown's Drinking from a Bitter Cup* (2014). It attempts to shed light on the lifelong sufferings of the protagonist Sylvia and her response to these sufferings and trauma. The study in hand questions the sufferings of Sylvia which have been depicted in the novel and how does she respond to these excruciating experiences?

The study also highlights how society often fails to protect the vulnerable groups such as women and children. As a result, the individuals from these groups become traumatized thereby leaving them cognitively impaired. The social environment can create many causes and outcomes of trauma which deeply bruises the individuals (Vickroy, 2014).

The concept of trauma is as old as is the history of man. The critics of trauma trace it back to the expulsion of Adam from the happy fields of Eden as the first example of trauma. The human history is full of horrors of wars and many other forms of exploitation where the weak had to face the suffering from the powerful. Thus lack of power and social position is considered as major cause of bringing trauma to the lower strata of society. Trauma theories have been applied to different kinds of human experiences such as war, Holocaust, battered women victims of rape and slavery (Caruth, 1995, 1996; Felman, 1992; van der Kolk 1996).

Moglen (2001) opines that the trauma novel as a genre ascended in later decade of twentieth century with the publication of the novel *The Beloved* by Toni Morrison later on including many others like W.G Sebald, Pat Barker, Margaret Atwood, Benjamin Wilkomirski and Anne Michaels. Even prior to the publication of these novels there were the literary texts which proposed the theme of trauma, but those could not attract the attention of the critics of trauma theory. With the expansion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as psychological clinical tool, trauma attracted the public interest in the 1980s. This later on raised public interest in trauma, the development of trauma studies and its reflection in the literary field.

Theoretical Framework

The present study uses a combined approach of (Vickroy, 2014) and Salmona (2013) to draw insights from the text. According to Vickroy, literary works are the site to explore the multiplicity of responses of individuals to an overwhelming and painful event. He further asserts that trauma can be analyzed from social, situational and narrative perspectives. However, the current study aims to explore the social and situational trauma of a young girl who suffered from sex abuse along with other pains in her life in *Brown's Drinking from a Bitter Cup* (2014).

A traumatic event is one in which individuals feel themselves to be utterly helpless (Vickroy, 2014). The responses to trauma can be understood by placing them in the social and cultural milieu. He further argues that situational variables can multiply the damaging effects that occurred on one's psyche due to trauma. Vickroy (2014) is of the view that the traumatic experiences are so intense that these experiences can impair the emotional and cognitive functioning of individuals leading them to behave in deviant ways. In fiction, traumatized characters are offered as clues and bits of memories to reassess survival and finally in new ways of thinking and being (Vickroy, 2014)

Salmona (2013) points out that traumatic memory and amnesia emphasizing that the survivors manage to find out their ways to cope with their traumatic experiences which are incomprehensible to those around them. The recognition of traumatic memories can lessen the feelings of guilt and blame thereby providing them the possibility of healing. Although it is concerned with both genders, yet the consequences are influenced by societal roles sanctioning male violence and female victimization (Salmona, 2013). She further asserts that victims can depict deviant behavioral patterns such as psychological orders owing to the trauma they have endured.

Textual Analysis

Overview of the novel *Brown's Drinking from a Bitter Cup*

The story revolves around Sylvia Butler, a young African-American girl raised by her mother. Since childhood, Sylvia suffered from excruciating experiences. Her mother had mental health issues, which caused her daughter to be ostracized socially. Her mother succumbed to the sufferings of her life and committed suicide. After that, Sylvia had to leave her home town and her beloved Aunt Miss Cora. She started living with her father and step mother in Alabama. Her step mother Vivian often used to insult and misbehave with Sylvia. After some time, her father had a heart attack and he passed away leaving her alone. Meanwhile, Uncle Charles (brother of her step mother) sexually molested her. Sylvia had to endure his sexual advances partly because no one would believe her and partly because she suffered from Stockholm syndrome. Ultimately, she decided to stand up for herself and tried to stop Uncle Charles. He molested her badly with physical abuse when Sylvia showed resistance. She ran from Alabama and went to Miss Cora in Louisville. Later on, she decided to start a new life and worked to earn money. Unfortunately, Charles came to Louisville in search of Sylvia and shot her. However, she recovered from that gunshot and found about her pregnancy. Finally, by the end of the novel, she resolves to survive with her baby.

Situational Trauma in Childhood

The novel depicts the social and situational trauma of Sylvia's life. She had to go through pain and sufferings since early childhood on account of her mother's mental sickness.

I did not tell her sometimes my mama would be passed out drunk on the floor and I had to help her bathe and get into the bed. My Mama was sometimes sick and I had to see about her instead of doing my homework (Brown, 2014, p. 19).

This is doubly painful for Sylvia because she needed affection and care as a child. Not only she was deprived of these affections but also she had to endure the painful condition of her mother. Her sadness and gloom intensified when her mother committed suicide. "The year I turned ten and the year my Mama killed herself. She was thirty-five, and dying is the last thing that should have been on her mind" (Brown, 2014, p.7). These situational variables multiplied the damaging effects occurred in one's psyche due to trauma (Vickroy. 2014). The suicide of her mother deeply bruised her mentally as she had to leave her home town and beloved Aunt Miss Cora. This was so excruciating that she could not differentiate between her dream and reality "I closed my eyes, wishing to God or whatever out there would listen, to let me wake up and this be a dream. Let me wake up, and be back with mama in Louisville whatever I was loved. But when I opened my eyes, it was just as I thought it would be" (Brown p. 68). Here Sylvia's desire that it all should be a dream is very significant. It shows her cognitive impairment in the face of traumatic events rendering her unable to accept the reality. The events were so uncontrollable and terrifying that they deprive the individuals to assimilate the experiences in the normal way (Freud,1975).

Sufferings in Alabama

In Alabama, the next phase of Sylvia's life started replete with situational sufferings. Here, she underwent difficult times as her step mother showed resentment in accepting her when she came to know about the past of her husband. She also humiliated Sylvia's mother in front of her which deeply bruised her "Don't you talk about my Mama. Don't you ever say anything about my Mama? Tears were dreaming down my face." (Brown,p.67)

Vickroy (2014) argues that trauma can interact with behavioral constructs. The behavior of her step mother and her comments about the character of her real mother added the pain and sufferings of Sylvia.

Another important incident in the novel indicates the situational trauma, as well as the bad behavior of Sylvia's step mother Vivian towards her when the whole family was enjoying the Easter breaks in Panama Citybeach. Sylvia was much close to Uncle Ray while living in Louisville. He was murdered in a skirmish

he desired that his ashes should be buried in sea. Since then Sylvia had carefully kept Uncle Ray's ashes in a vase and brought it to Alabama with her. In Panama City beach she found a good chance to bury Uncle Ray's ashes. She woke up in the middle of the night to accomplish this task but unfortunately caught by Vivian. After that Vivian smacked her brutally "But I never cried when she spanked me. She'd make me pull down my pants, and she's spank me with one of Daddy's thick, black belts and I'd just stand there, willing myself not to cry." (Brown, p.123) When Sylvia was smacked by Vivian she did not cry and Vivian herself was surprised at this reaction of Sylvia. A variety of responses can be exhibited from the individuals suffering trauma including the weird responses (Vickroy,2014).

Social and Situational Trauma

Sylvia also had to go through social and situational trauma simultaneously in her life. Her father's heart attack increased the miserable state of her life. She was quite distressed "God, I prayed, not making a sound, just moving my lips slightly. You can't take Daddy too. I won't have anyone then." (Brown, 2014, p.169). Unfortunately, her father died due to that heart attack and Sylvia was left alone in her life. On that day when the whole family was performing the last rituals of her father, she was entirely out of her senses and could not comprehend the situation around her "I also remember people hugging and kissing me. Maybe I said things back to them" (Brown, 2014, p. 188). Here the words "May be" is quite significant to show her mental turmoil. She could not remember exactly what had happened on that day. According to Salmona (2013), the paralysis of the psyche occurs when anyone faces an extremely traumatic event. This is what happened with Sylvia on the death of her father as it was extremely painful for her to lose her father just after her mother "I shook my head laughing. Everybody looked at me, I couldn't help myself." (Brown, 2014, p. 189). She broke into uncontrollable laughter which was quite unusual for a daughter on the death of her father. According to Freud (1975) trauma results when an extreme event breaks through the protective shield that allows an individual to process and interpret experiences. The extreme input of stimulus shocks the individual's cognitive system leading him/her to behave in the ways incomprehensible to others.

When Sylvia's father was hospitalized, Uncle Charles sexually molested her. She was unable to believe as she was much closed to him and this was the response to trauma or severe circumstances she faced.

All I know is every possible emotion flowed over me Sadness, fear, anger, shame. I hurt so bad it would not have surprised me if everything would come falling out, but I just lay there holding my privates, wishing for my daddy to come.(brown,2014,p.192)

Guilt, shame and low self-esteem can be the responses to trauma depending upon the severity of the event (Vickroy,2014). Here after this excruciating event,

Sylvia was overwhelmed by different kinds of emotions namely fear, anger and shame.

Sylvia wanted to stop Uncle Charles from molesting her continuously but she couldn't "First, I knew he wouldn't listen to me, and second, I figure out no one would believe me..... for a moment he came to my room and raped me." (Brown, 2014, p.196) The continuous sexual molestation by Uncle Charles and Sylvia's inability to stop him created the extreme sense of despair and loneliness in her "Every morning after daddy died I opened my eyes and realized I didn't have anybody. No grown -up to take care of me and love me the right way" (Brown, p. 193). According to Herman (1997) traumatic events can violate the autonomy of the individual at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured and defiled. This is what happened with Sylvia. Further, she was of the view that no one would believe her shows that her point of view counts for nothing and the traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others (Herman, 1997).

Consequently, Sylvia was emotionally and cognitively impaired about the sexual advances of Uncle Charles due to her lifelong traumatic experiences. Under extreme circumstances, the already existing mental schemas are unable to accommodate frightening experiences (Kolk, 1987). "Uncle Charles was my bitter cup. I knew this. And I could not stop drinking from it." (Brown, p.226)

Sylvia suffered from Stockholm syndrome in which the victims tolerate their abusers in order to ensure their survival, this syndrome is the survival mechanism adopted by majority of victims both male and females (Salmona, 2013). "I didn't have a choice but to do the things he made me do because more than anything, I wanted someone to love me and made me feel loved in a sick and perverted way." (Brown, 2014, p.231) Sylvia had the realization that behaving in this way towards Uncle Charles and tolerating his sexual advances was not the normal reaction "I knew I sound crazy for both wanting him to leave me alone and wanting him to be with me." (Brown, 2014, p.212) This is natural for an eleven years old girl who suffered from so many extreme and overwhelming experiences in life to react in a perverted way. The normal behavioral patterns cannot be expected from an individual who had undergone extreme traumatic experiences; as a result, the existing mental schemas are unable to incorporate the experience in the normal or acceptable way.

The sexual molestation by Uncle Charles can be termed as social trauma as a society often fails to protect the vulnerable groups such as women and children. This can be experienced by both genders, however in most cases the young females become the victims. The societal roles contribute towards this social trauma resulting in male violence and female victimization (Salmona, 2013, p. 257). Sylvia's sufferings and pains became manifold when faced by sexual advances of Charles after the death of her father. Further, her notion that no one would believe her if she reports this hideous act indicates the power structure of the society in

general and her position in the home of her step mother in particular. As argued by Salmona (2013) power structures conspire to protect abusers, particularly men in prominent positions.

As a result, Sylvia became quite distressed and disillusioned from her life “I was too weighted down to keep living. I felt like I was suffocating from enormity of everything. I felt tired and weary. I was eleven years old and it seems like I had already lived two lifetimes.” (Brown, p.199) Here suffocation implies that now the sexual advances of Uncle Charles were becoming unbearable for her. Her feelings that she has lived two lifetimes at the age of eleven are quite significant implying the severity of circumstances which she had to face. The social environment and sometimes the situational variables contribute towards the trauma of an individual (Vickroy, 2014).

Responses to Trauma

Finally, Sylvia decided to take a stance against Uncle Charles’s sexual advancements and leave Alabama. Here she had to face a difficult situation in escaping from the grip of Uncle Charles. She came to her Aunt Miss Cora in Louisville. Here she started earning and tried to bring her life at a normal pattern. “I opened a bank account for myself and for the first time in a long time, my life seemed pretty normal” (Brown, 2014, p. 266) This particular act shows Sylvia’s courage to survive as she started thinking new ways of being and existing (Vickroy, 2014).

After some days, Uncle Charles came to Louisville in search of Sylvia. She was shot by him and got injured but recovered ultimately. In the hospital, she came to know about her pregnancy and decided to live happily with her baby “We were survivors and we were going to keep on surviving together.” (Browns, 2014,p.287). Sylvia was resilient. It means that she wants to recover and survive. She wanted to live happily with her baby in spite facing so many traumatic events in life. Vickroy (2014) argues that trauma can be situated within the dynamic process of feeling, assimilating and recovering from any intense experience.

Thus Sylvia decided to survive and live with her baby after facing so many traumatic experiences in her life. This also shows her desire to recuperate from these horrible experiences. As argued by Vickroy (2014) the traumatized characters are offered with memories and reminiscences of the past to reassess it and hence, they can engage in new ways of survival. Sylvia after facing so many traumatic events in her life suffered from a psychological disorder Stockholm syndrome. But ultimately she decided to survive and tried to bring her life at a normal pattern.

Conclusion

The current study explored the traumatized consciousness of a ten years old girl Sylvia in Brown’s *Drinking from a Bitter Cup*. The study was focused on the

social and situational trauma suffered by the protagonist of the novel. Further, her responses to these traumatic events were also analyzed in the present study. The overall analysis shows that Sylvia underwent situational trauma when faced with the death of her mother and father. Apart from this, she was sexually molested by her step mother's brother Uncle Charles. For four years, she had to tolerate the sexual advancements of Charles on the account that no one would believe her. As a result, she experienced extreme distress and suffered from Stockholm syndrome, however, by the end of the novel, she decided to survive and wanted to live her life happily with her baby. It can be regarded as the recuperating aspect in the aftermath of trauma as discussed by Brison (1999) and Malson (2012).

This research is beneficial to highlight the burning issue of child sex abuse prevalent in many societies. Society often fails to protect the most vulnerable groups such as women and children leading them towards an abnormal existence. Those who suffered adverse childhood experiences were at a significantly higher risk for physical and psychological disorders (Hillis, Anda, Felitti, & Marchbanks, 2001). Salmona (2013) argues that in most of the cases, the perpetrators are those who should be protecting and nurturing the children. The same is the case with Sylvia in this novel. Further, contextualizing individual trauma in the larger social backdrop can give the readers a critical way of understanding of sufferings of human beings in various circumstances.

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