Deciphering Trauma and its Excruciating Experiences: An Analysis of Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka on the Shore*

Dr. N.U. Lekshmi
Assistant Professor and Research Guide
Sree Ayyappa College for Women
Chunkankadai.
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundarnar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, 627012
Tamil Nadu, India

S.P. Soubhagya
Full Time Research Scholar
Sree Ayyappa College for Women, Chunkankadai.
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundarnar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, 627012, Tamil Nadu, India.

Trauma theory, developed as an interdisciplinary field asserts its autonomist nature in the twenty first century. It affirms that trauma crafts a split in human psyche and is able to destroy ones identity. The theory gained wide prominence after series of attacks that affected humanity like holocaust, shell shock, the wars and a lot more that traumatized people and led to several psychological issues. Kali Tal and Cathy Caruth remain seminal figures in the field of literary trauma theory. According to the psychiatrist, Lenore Terr, “psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind”(8). The root of the word trauma takes its name from the medical branch where it speaks about intense bodily injuries in human beings. With the passage of time and the evolution of new technologies the word trauma is not only limited to the physical damages but also to the emotional and psychic harm done to the consistent sense of self. Nineteenth century witnessed the inter-relation between trauma and psychoanalytic
theories with the great luminaries like Jean Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Joseph Breuer, Sigmund Freud, Morton Prince, Hermann Oppenheim and Abram Kardiner diving deep into the psychic shock and the resultant hysteric condition. Trauma theory plays a very important role in various fields like psychoanalysis, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, humanities, film studies and literature. Sigmund Freud was the first to draw equivalence between physical trauma and psychic trauma.

Literature being the reflection of the society serves as a medium to portray the traumatic disorders caused by the traumatizing events. Trauma narratives gained eminence and reached its zenith with the urge of the writers to study the inner recesses of their characters. Trauma theory mainly focuses on the ‘repressed memory’ wherein Freud and Breuer explain the term by elaborating that the memory that is hidden in the unconscious mind of an individual haunts them whenever and wherever they go. Traumatic stress and its implications have become more prevalent in the contemporary society where people are in a steady chase to find their identity. Haruki Mrakami is a significant Japanese writer who is noted for his depiction of the troubled psyche of humanity along with the traumatic subjugations.

Memory plays a vital part in Murakami’s works where he uses the technique of flashbacks, nightmares, illusions, amnesia and change of identity. Murakami being a victim who witnessed the Kansai earthquake and Tokyo Aum gas attack spends his days in studying and interviewing people about its effects and after effects. As a result of his probing into “two of the gravest tragedies in Japan’s post-war history” (206), he crafts a novel that portrays man’s quest to find his lost shadow through imagination.

*Kafka on the Shore*, a highly acclaimed novel of Murakami depicts the struggle of two major characters along with their internal as well as external conflicts. The characters in the
novel are haunted by a sense of loss that could never be spelled out to anyone. Murakami’s characters are incapable to come out from their tragic love affairs, are very much eager in having illicit relationships and are interested in telling lies and cheating. In an interview with Murakami, he says:

*Kafka on the Shore* contains several riddles, but there aren’t any solutions provided. Instead, several of these riddles combine, and through their interaction the possibility of a solution takes shape. And the form this solution takes will be different for each reader. To put in another way, the riddles function as part of the solution. It’s hard to explain, but that’s the kind of novel I set out to write. (np)

The intermingling of two plots such as the story of Kafka Tamura and the journey of the fifty one year old man Nakata ends with the discovery of their own self and the self-discovery of Miss Saeki who is often encapsulate as the mother of Kafka. The paper tries to bring forth the traumatic experiences underwent by Kafka, Nakata and Miss Saeki. All these three characters are victims to existential crisis which made them question their own identity. Through memory they try to reinforce and reintroduce their harrowing experiences which result in their emptiness. Being a rough-edged boy, Kafka’s predestination made him a run away and it is evident through his words, “All kind of things are happening to me, some I chose, some I didn’t. I don’t know how to tell one from the other any more. What I mean is, it feels like everything’s been decided in advance-that I’m following a path somebody else has already mapped out for me”(214). His wounded childhood made him a prey to his present situation. Abandoned by his mother and sister, he led the life of a lone wolf who is in a constant query to find love. Son of a sculptor, Kafka later learns that his father is a cruel cat killer whose only intention is to pollute everything he touched. The Oedipal prophecy intensifies the trauma encountered by Kafka. Historian Dominick LaCapra speaks about the distinction
between the loss and absence in case of a public identity. In the novel Kafka experiences a kind of loss as well as an absence. The lack of motherly love and absence of half shadow best discloses the trauma encountered by Kafka. He is a guy who deliberately chooses loneliness and as a result he is forced to encounter certain traumatic stipulations. By shunning his responsibility he goes in search of his other half which he hopes may fill the void in his life. The author deliberately introduces ‘The boy Named Crow’ as the mind voice of Kafka. All the hidden agenda and desires of Kafka are revealed through the character Crow and can be considered as an alter ego of Kafka Tamura.

The intensity with which trauma hits people is evident through their inability to remember and retrieve their subjectiveness and therefore they lack the conscious memory of the traumatic events. One such character who satisfies this caucus is Nakata. Trauma of war also plays a major theme in the novel. Nakata, the victim of World War II could not repossess his self because he was traumatized by childhood experience. He lacks the intellectual facility to summon up and recount the unfortunate incidents. He continues to be a victim of the Rice Bowl Hill incident even when the other children affected by this incident regained their consciousness. People affected by trauma will be in a condition of deadness and they live in their past, as future is blocked for them. For a traumatized individual, the past occurrence will often jump into the present and then there is a constant shift back and forth and so that the traumatized person cannot comprehend reality with fantasy.

Cathy Caruth in the work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* defines trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flash-backs, nightmares and other repetitive phenomenon” (91). The Rice Bowl incident shows the distinction between collective trauma and individual trauma wherein Nakata suffers from individual trauma as
part of collective trauma. The act of regaining consciousness is very well described by the author as:

Out of the blue he sat up in bed, stretched and looked around the room. He’d regained consciousness, and medically he was perfectly fine. Soon, though, we realized he’d lost all his memory. He couldn’t even remember his own name. The place he lived in, his school, his parents’ faces – it was all gone. He couldn’t read, and wasn’t even aware that this was Japan or the Earth. He couldn’t even fathom the concept of Japan or the Earth. He’d returned to this world with his mind wiped clean. The proverbial blank slate. (71)

Freud’s concept of the repressed memory is seen in the characterization of Nakata. He is gifted with a special ability to prophesy the future and this in turn creates trauma in him. The slap he received from the war makes him return to the condition of the blank state. The psychiatrist explains Nakata’s condition as lack of memory rather than the loss of memory. Repetition is one of the major concepts of trauma theory. Theorists have proven that people often tend to repeat certain words that are hidden in their memory. Likewise, Nakata uses the word ‘empty’. He says “Nakata’s empty inside…Nakata’s like a library without a single book. It wasn’t always like that. I used to have books inside me. For a long time I couldn’t remember, but now I can. I used to be normal, just like everybody else. But something happened and I ended up like a container with nothing inside” (306). His ability to converse with cats and his travel around Japan with the accompaniment of a truck driver shows man’s need to find their real essence. The past life of Nakata is emphasized by the author to make the readers recognize the intensity with which trauma has its play on Nakata. Though he was uncertain about the purpose of his life somehow he could foresee the path to his destiny. Unlike the traumatized people, Nakata is able to anticipate his future and is in search of an ‘entrance stone’ in spite of his mental impairment.
Miss Saeki, the hollow container who longs to identify her lost self often foresees her death. Saeki’s trauma is caused due to a love affair. She has an individual wound and her soul moves in a mysterious way to find the hidden meaning of her existence. Through her conversation with Kafka her throbbing and excruciating experience is revealed and Murakami through the preference of words best explains the distressing condition of Miss Saeki:

“Exactly. Which is why I’m living here, in this world where things are forever being damaged, where the heart is fickle, where time flows past without a break.” As if hinting at the flow of time, she’s silent for a while. “You know, though,” she goes on, “when I was 15, I thought there had to be a place like that in the world. I was sure that somewhere I’d run across the entrance that would take me to that other world” (267).

The terrible mental trauma of Miss Saeki made her isolate herself within the four walls of a library. Her tragic love story left a never healing wound in her psyche that she often broods over the question of her existence. Death is the only path for her to escape from these traumatic conditions and like Nakata she is also in search of an ‘entrance stone’ to exit from the existing world. She is not affected by the passage of time and timelessness: “The hands of the clock buried inside her soul ground to a halt then. Time outside, of course, flows on as always, but she isn’t affected by it. For her, what we consider normal time is essentially meaningless” (32).

The character Johnnie Walker discloses how people crave for death because of their trauma. Johnnie Walker is a man who lost curiosity in life and for him life is a chain of distressful events where man tries to push aside all the happy moments fearing the trauma it could bring. His love for death is evident when he insists on Nakata to kill him “The one
saving grace for you here – if indeed you need such a thing – is the fact that I want to die. I’ve asked you to kill me, so you don’t need to suffer any pangs of conscience. You’re doing exactly what I’m hoping for” (153). These lines authenticate how confused and perplexed people are in this contemporary chaotic world.

All the major characters express an unambiguous, idiosyncratic response to trauma that they often oscillate between reality and dream. The values accredited to the traumatic experience are shaped by the individuals need to escape from the death driving forces to begin a new way of life. As contemporary trauma theory stresses on the magnitude of a character’s relationship with place, the novel *Kafka on the Shore* also evidently explores how characters are confined within certain physical space and psychic boundaries. Place has become fundamental in the representation of trauma because the physical place of affliction and hammering induce the readers to identify themselves with the characters. The characters experience self estrangements which result in the shattering of one’s identity. The characters in the novel are enforced to reorganize their self by accepting all the traumatic conditions. Murakami succeeds in blending the real and fantastic levels of meaning by making his characters escape the trauma by finding the meaning of their existence.

**WORKS CITED**


