

Representing the History through Trauma: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The representation of trauma in the literary hemisphere constitutes the individual and social desires which are to be hard to express. It represents the unconscious output of the emotion which are suppressed due to social structure. The scholars, therefore, try to decode their inner sense through the use of language. Such representation can be seen in Melville and Dostoevsky's simultaneous articulation in *Moby Dick* and *Notes from Underground* respectively. We have seen that both have represented the past through their construction of the linguistic approaches in their works. The reason of such representation was their hidden instincts which they could not initiate in society. Melville and Dostoevsky have undergone the trauma caused by emerging unrest due to growing civilization of their countries respectively. This paper aims to find out how these authors have recalled the past through the representation of the trauma in their literary works. While seeking the objective of the paper, the linguistic approaches of various critics and theorists would be negotiated to develop the hypothesis.

Keywords: Trauma, Melville, Dostoevsky, past.

Introduction and Literature Review

Trauma is supposed to be an extreme condition and an unrepresentable event. Cathy Caruth, who pioneered a psychoanalytic post-structural approach suggests that "trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language (M. Balaev, 2014:1). According to this Lacanian perspective, trauma is conceptualized as a persistent absence that divides knowledge of the traumatic experience, preventing linguistic value other than referential expression. This approach permits a special emphasis on language indeterminacy, ambiguous referentiality, and aporia, particularly for Caruth's deconstructive criticism. Arguments that sought to emphasize the extent of profound suffering from an external source, whether that source is a single perpetrator or collective social practices, were significant in the sense that they relied on the presumptive inherent neurobiological characteristics of trauma that cause dissociation and refuse representation. The depiction of trauma in art is thus at odds with how we currently view art, literature, and

representational techniques. In our efforts to represent, we make an effort to strike a balance between reality and fantasy.

Again, the aesthetic is a contextual presumption, but in order for something to be referred to as art, both the representation of experience and the representation of imagination must be done in an aesthetic way. Trauma is inherently a challenge to such arrangements because the victims of trauma experiences pain and suffer so acutely that language frequently fails to express or is insufficient for achieving that goal. Even if it is sufficient, it can be difficult to arrange in an attractive way. We have tried to address this issue by referencing two pieces of art that seek to navigate these difficulties while challenging perceptions of art, aesthetics, and modes of representation in the process. These two books are Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864).

We can access through the life of Melville and Dostoyevsky that both authors have experienced horrific events in their own lives, in very different ways. Dostoyevsky was given a prison term of four years in a Siberian labor camp and an extra six years in exile, according to an analysis of their biographies. He has remained in a silent cell that has been closed off from everything. He had no access to any social networks. Even the time when he was composing *Notes from Underground* was challenging for him. He passed through the consumption of killing his wife also. He had epileptic seizures and other unpleasant conditions, and his health was poor. "I am a sick guy," begins *Notes from Underground...*" (2015:1) projects this paradoxical and problematic nature of its 'speaking subject'.

Similarly, Melville had undergone terrible experiences during various poises and professional life and there are records that he used to suffer deeply in psychological dissociation, depression, and manic psychological state.

For both, creative self-expression became the only method to retain their sanity. After his return from Siberia in 1859, Dostoyevsky echoed his thoughts on man's need for creative self-expression in "A Series of Articles on Russian Literature" (1861), where he wrote that the 'need to affirm oneself, to distinguish oneself, to stand out, is a law of nature for every individual; it is his right, his essence, the law of his being' (1861:07). He went on to note that this need 'in the crude unstructured state of society manifests itself in the individual quite crudely and even savagely'. This shows a kind of contradiction that if anybody is not allowed to articulate, represent, or communicate in a valid manner, he would suffer from trauma.

In other words, trauma is an experience which cannot really be expressed or communicated. Such types of challenges have been negotiated in *Notes from Underground*. The author desires to communicate an experience without which he will turn to a pathological state, and it is a state which cannot be articulated easily. The Underground man admits that "...perhaps by writing things down I really shall find relief." But soon he reprimands that "I am bored" (37). Through Dostoevsky's this assumption, we can trace that traumatic experience

pathologically divides identity as a metaphor to depict the severity of the harm which is resulted by individual sense of coherent and the change of consciousness caused by the experience. Thus, Dostoevsky through *Notes from Underground* has expressed an inexpressible experience.

The popular trauma theory which is being rely on the abreactive model of trauma used to argue that traumatic experience results in a “temporal gap” and a dissolution of the self as Kali Tal in *Worlds of Hurt* writes: “Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception” (1996:15). The requirement of recreating or acting out through narrative recollection of the trauma is emphasized by this Freudian idea of memory and trauma past. Tal has made it quite obvious that remembering trauma always results in an approximation of the past since trauma prevents knowledge and, thus, representation. According to the literary trauma theory put forward by Kali Tal and critics like Cathy Caruth, traumatic experiences and memories are inherently characterized by the responses they elicit, including cognitive turmoil and possible division of consciousness. We find that the Underground man of Dostoevsky is “oppressed by some very ancient memory”. He finds himself trapped in “hundreds of similar memories (1953:23)”.

Petar Ramadanovic has suggested that narratives resulting from trauma represent efforts to stake out an independent self and that these narratives are therefore narcissistic. Just as, Melville’s novel *Moby Dick* critiques the notion of therapeutic possibility, it poses a discursive ethical proposition that incoherence has its own inherent virtue in an account of trauma. Similarly, the Underground man in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* rebukes, “Ha, ha, ha! Well, if you like, essentially there’s no such thing as volition!” (24).

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his celebrated work *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, shows that Dostoevsky is one of the first authors to break up the unified “I” by presenting nonintegrated ‘speaking subjects’, such as the narrator in *Notes from Underground*. This decentring of the “I”, which takes into account unconscious as well as linguistic forges, invites us to reconsider our conception of representation. Trauma fails the author’s strategy of spooling the thread of traumatic experiences around a unified and defined character. Because the trauma or traumatic experience, in order to get reported, is bound to operate the carriage of language which according to Paul de Man is “tripartite” in nature. Paul de Man writes in his essay, “The Resistance To Theory”, “the science of language as consisting of grammar, rhetoric and logic (or dialectics), is in fact a set of unresolved tensions powerful enough to have generated an infinitely prolonged discourse of endless frustration” (1982:359).

Man has viewed that rhetorical and figural component of language is unreliable for stating simple truth. He further opines if ‘it is not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language’, then it shows the anxiety of the scholars who subscribe to the false concept of representation as conventional, mimetic

recounting also fails to do justice. Similarly, Tara Robin Fee in her essay, “Irreconcilable Differences: Voice, Trauma, and Melville’s *Moby-Dick*” (2012) establishes that Ishmael’s narration is chaotic and lacks coherence. She argues that the discourse or fictional work itself is inflicting the trauma and therefore any sense of closure or resolution is elusive.

Moreover, Deconstructionists claim that because the self is constituted by language, and does not exist prior to language, the “cogito” of Descartes is basically an illusion. Man falsely imagines that concepts exist prior to language, that we create and control language, and that therefore some reality or “transcendental signified” exists outside of and prior to language, which is the basic fallacy of Western metaphysics. Thus, we find the Underground man pleading: “I don’t want to be restricted in any way in editing my notes. I shan’t introduce any order or system. Whatever I happen to remember I shall write down” (1999: 36). This allusive representation detaches Dostoevsky from present to recall past.

This transcendental signifier “I” has variety of allusions to recall the past. We find that in both ancient Indian scriptures and Jain scriptures, there is a distrust of the words and distrust of the common ordinary languages. The “I” strives to achieve the divine symphony—*Anhad Naad*. If we look at early Indian philosophers, we find that they have compared this inexpressible sense “I” with the realization of Brahma. Since, it is inexpressible, effulgence and mind’s expanding experience that the ordinary human language cannot express it adequately.

Therefore, the early Indian philosophers have talked of various level of speech to experience its different levels of intones which are based on the elevation of our consciousness-- *Para*, *Pashyanti*, *Madhyama* and *Vaikhari* which correspond to our four states of consciousness—*Turiya* (the transcendental state), *Sushupti* (dreamless state), *Swapna* (dreaming state), and *Jagrut* (wakeful state). Thus, *Para* represents the transcendental consciousness, *Pashyanti* represents the intellectual consciousness, *Madhyama* represents the mental consciousness, and *Vaikhari* represents the physical consciousness.

The *para* experience which is expressed in the Bhakti and spiritual poetry shows how they have tried to bring in apparently contradictory and paradoxical things through which they were able to articulate. Therefore, Jain and Buddhist philosophers retreated to silence. But Dostoyevsky and Melville are trying to represent these inexpressible in human terms and thereby pushing the aesthetic boundaries of various genres in order to articulate the inexpressible in their respective works.

The experience of trauma often fragments identity and forces a separation from the self. The Underground man in Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* avers, “I understand damn all thing about my illness, and I can’t say for certain which part of me is affected” (1999:3). But the crisis of witnessing also involves the idea that, as Jacques Derrida puts it, testimony

‘always goes hand in hand with at least the possibility of fiction, perjury, lie’ (Derrida, 27). As Derrida makes clear that all testimony is fiction, perjury, lie and not used to dissolve the crucial distinction between truth and lie, truth and fiction. But it is used to suggest that they are inextricably linked. Derrida adds another perception to our thinking of testimony that testimony involves a ‘universalizable singularity’ (Derrida 94). He says that a testimony must in the first place be singular, unique. Such recreation we find in Dostoevsky when he in *Notes from Underground* claims, “...to be precise, no one was like me, nor was I like anyone else. ‘I am one persona and they are *everybody* [sic]” (40). Similarly, when in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Stubb asks Ahab to consider muffling the thudding of his leg as the captain paces the deck night after night, the narrator sighs, “Ah! Stubb, thou did’st not know Ahab then” (1851:111).

In *Notes from Underground*, it is a highly personal trauma which Dostoyevsky tries to represent—the kind of deep trauma which the modern living has imposed on individual psyche whereas Melville talks of a whole modern corporate trauma. While looking at the Melville’s *Moby Dick* various critics talk of the trauma which Ahab underwent because of the dismemberment of his body and the trauma which Ishmael underwent under the monomaniacal leadership of Ahab. These are the two significant traumatic experiences which are the subject matter of *Moby Dick* and to achieve that there is a whole lot of strategic and structural negotiations which the narrator Ishmael has undertaken in *Moby Dick*.

But most of the critics have ignored the trauma which has been identified by Lawrence in *Moby Dick*. Lawrence talks of a trauma brought about by the machine civilization, the mercantile machine civilization, which actually has taken away the soul of the entire civilization. Lawrence sees the tragedy of *Moby Dick* as not just the death of all the sailors or for that matter the death of Captain Ahab or peripheral survival of Ishmael, but he points out toward the larger tragedy—the tragedy of the death of the human soul. Ishmael has survived but he has lost his soul. This kind of traumatic experience, he sees in *Pequod* a miniature version, a metonymy of the western civilization, in which the *Pequod* has actually drawn characters from all strata of society—the Indians, the Negroes, the black and various races as it is the collapse of the western civilization. It seems to be the representation of what really happened a few years later in the Second World War.

Adorno looks at it as the metonymy for the collapse of the western society. It is the triumphalism of the western mercantile and machine-driven society. Lawrence actually calls it a tragedy which is domineering spirit, the desire to dominate others, the desire to enslave others, to perpetuate the hegemony of the West. This is hustling toward the destruction not only of the West, but anything associated with the West.

This kind of trauma Melville had faced, and *Moby Dick* is the articulation of that traumatic experience. He has applied a lot of narrative devices and structural changes in the novel form to represent this. The novel begins with a first-person narrative “Call me Ismael” and subsequently this first person unrealistically is able to enter into the consciousness of the

other major characters like Ahab and others. This is the reason that surviving soul of Ishmael is able to see and apprehend the danger that is going to take place. So, the difference between Melville and Dostoyevsky lies that in *Notes of Underground* and *Moby Dick*. Dostoyevsky focalizes an isolate in which an individual being can go. The extent of the humiliation that persona can inflict upon himself. He goes to deep recess as if going deep down the hell of the consciousness. The amount of self-ridicule one can perpetuate. He is trying to explore the self-deprecation for which an individual human being is capable of.

We can see that difference of the trauma which is explored on an individual level and that one like the Pinda and reflection of humiliation at cosmic level, in the tragedy of *Pequod*. We also see how an entire civilization driven by eccentricity and willfulness could destroy itself and in Dostoyevsky's level how an individual to the same kind of willfulness and eccentricity can destroy oneself. But in both cases, it is the narrative, it's the power of the imagination which actually saves mankind from absolute annihilation. In this sense, both are highly ethical gesture. In the sense that the power of art and the imagination are able to sustain the continuity of life and also by imagining the extent to which perdition can go. It has safeguarded both the individual and the society from the repetition of such traumatic experiences. There are various ways to really negotiate these contradictions.

Right from the ancient spiritual texts to the present time, aestheticians, and philosophers have been trying to resolve this paradox. They have been trying to resolve the puzzle "How to polarize the inexpressible?" Ultimately the art and the imagination are probably the ways to make a tentative raid into the unconscious, and the inexpressible, and try to validate the human life over traumatic experiences that tend to disrupt the continuity of life. The Underground man also becomes suspicious of his desires to express himself and questions, "Why, why exactly do I want to write?" (1999: 37).

As Adorno has said after Auschwitz, "How can one really write poetry or philosophy?" But the fact remains that human being continued to write poetry, life went on and so on and so forth. Griselda Pollock opines in her essay "Art/Trauma/Representation" that "art of a certain kind can become a means of staging of encounter rather than the protected turning away from the fearful limit frontier" (2009:40). Thus, the Underground man also acknowledges that "for some reasons" he believes that "writing things down" could help him in getting "rid" "of it" or "at least there is a chance". So "why not try?"

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