

Working Through Vs. Acting Out in Sophia K. Apple`s COVID-19: A Gripping Novel Inspired By Real Event

¹Khalaf H. Ali, ²Intisar Rashid Khaleel

¹Master Student/ Tikrit University/ College of Education for Human Sciences/ English Department,
khalafhussein@gmail.com

²Tikrit University College of Education for Human Sciences English Department, intisarrashid@tu.edu.iq

Abstract

As interpreting concepts of processes like abreaction and repression, working through and acting out are the basic concern of the present study. The study attempts to trace the representation of those two traumatic concepts in Sophia K. Apple`s novel, in which COVID-19 pandemic is dealt with as a major source of trauma, i.e. the pandemic is regarded as a traumatic experience. Hence, that experience must surely involve certain key concepts of trauma theory, including that concepts are working through and acting out. The paper argues that these two concepts are represented in the novel, since it is viewed within the theoretical framework of trauma.

The basic trajectory the study takes is that these two concepts are represented by means of a variety of ways and techniques across the story. In other words, the representation of them isn't conditionally confined to the act of talk only, rather they are done by various means; such as deeds, behaviors, writing and actions.

By the progress of the body statement, it is hoped to come up with the consequences that the paper looks forward.

Keywords: Trauma, Working Through, Acting Out, COVID-19, Abreaction, Repression.

INTRODUCTION

Two significant key concepts in trauma theory that are discussed and elaborated by Dominick LaCapra, in particular, in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. these two concepts are basically related to the traumatic memory and the narrative memory, the concepts are; Acting out and Working through. It seems that as if the whole book is mainly dedicated to those two concepts, that is, no page unless it includes acting out and working through, which are two "binary oppositions" as it is stated Dominick LaCapra. To quote the statement that defines those two binary oppositions directly, "In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene". As for working through, he

suggests "Working through is an articulatory practice; to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one`s people) back ..." (LaCapra 21- 22, 49).

In a specified paragraph, dedicated for drawing a comparison between acting out and working through, Domicik LaCapra elaborates on each concept aside, claiming that acting out "the tendency to repeat something compulsively". As for working through, he states that "I see working through as a desirable process". Hence, acting out for the people who are undergone the traumatic experiences have a certain tendency to be haunted by the past, ghosts, to be shelled in the past not ever moving towards the present nor the future, even if they are in the present, they always tend

to be full of the past and never outside the circle of that traumatized past. In other words, traumatized people have a tendency to relive that traumatic occurrences in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, or in a compulsive manner. While in working through, the traumatized individuals get rid of the tendency of being closure in the past, instead they "distinguish between past, present, and future". That is, the traumatized individuals have the desire that they really do undergo certain traumatic events. i.e. they confront what happened to them desirably (Ibid 142-144).

As for Al Doory's viewpoint concerning those two concepts, she points out that "However, acting-out and working-through are based on two distinguished tendencies. While working-through is based on a desirable tendency to relive the past, acting-out is based on a compulsive one" (Al Doory 52).

Simply speaking, the process of working through is linked to the narrative memory, while the process of acting out is linked to the traumatized memory. In this case, it would be found out that working through is relevant to the process of healing the wounds and the will to narrate, while the process of acting out is the opposite, it is relevant to the will to ignore and repress the traumatic story. In this case, that traumatized memory is going to be revealed by means of such traumatic symptoms.

Working Through Vs Acting Out

The working-through and acting-out processes as major concepts listed within the key words of the trauma theory, are identical to the events of the novel. Each traumatic case the characters experience in the story must revolve around one basic axis, i.e. COVID-19 pandemic. Hence each process of working through or acting out must be emanated out of that pandemic.

It is a story of catastrophe that overwhelms both, the individual and collective community. If such a story is narrated and told, it would be a kind of recovery and abreaction, so it is working-through. While if it is the opposite,

that is, this catastrophe isn't told, then it wouldn't be neither recovery nor abreaction or healing, so it is acting-out. Furthermore, it is worth referring that the processes of working through and acting out aren't confined to talking only, as it "was the goal of Freud and Breuer talking cure" (Kurtz 97). Rather it could be represented in certain techniques; events, words, deeds, and behaviors. As it is pointed out by Onega and Canteau that such a process helps to "give adequate expression to the shocking event, either in deeds or words, since, as they argued: language serves as a substitute for action" (Canteau and Onega 2).

As for the shower scene when Samantha has been recalling back what kind of traumatic events she has just experienced, since she is happy, being enjoyed in crying out of fun, interests, then she starts sobbing, such senses suggest that she is remembering the previous events willingly and consciously. In this case, according to Lena-Simone Gunther, such an event represents a mode of confession for the traumatic sense she has just experienced, and how she has been influenced by means of that experience. Furthermore, since she does so, the process would echo one of the key concepts in the trauma theory, that is, working-through, that she willingly remembers and consciously narrates, in an attempt for healing herself from the traumatic experience she has just passed by. (Lena-Simone Gunther 35). In statement combining three of the key concepts of trauma theory; i.e. the process of flowing memories of the traumatic experiences, the process of repressing those memories, and the temporality of the traumatic moments, Seilder states that if such traumatic memories are represented, expressed and spoken, in this regard, they are assumed to be temporal, that is, passing by the three traumatic moments of the temporal structure of trauma, while if they aren't represented nor verbalized or spoken, they would never be articulated (Seilder 22). As for Samantha on the shower scene, it is apparent that she does remember and recall her memory willingly.

If Dori Laub's claim is going to be taken into consideration, in which he claims that "History was taking place with no witness: it

was also the very circumstance of being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially not be met during the actual occurrence" (Laub 37). It is an assumption that the witness might have existed, and it isn't conditional that the witness must exist "during the actual occurrence", in this regard, relevantly, such a case might raise an issue, i.e. the whole text (the novel) could be regarded as a testimonial narrative, since it tackles a story of a traumatic experience that most of its major characters; Samantha, Ed, Emily etc had passed by certain traumatic experiences. Hence, readers of such a text could be examined as doing bearing witness, despite the fact that the whole story is narrated by means of the omniscient narrator –knowing everything- rather than from the first person narrator's point of view that is the most proper narrative technique for working through and bearing witness, because those two processes are much stuck to the personal perspective of the individual who narrates. It is apparent through the narration that the narrator delves deeply in the inner side of the characters, so, consequently, if he is doing a process of abreaction for those characters in certain scenes, thus it is a kind of working through, and readers for those scenes in the novel, in this case, they are bearing witness for this process, at the end, the whole process is a testimonial narrative. The process of the testimonial narrative never takes place unless there does exist an external individual doing the process of bearing witness to the story been told, because "Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener" because the process of testimony needs another individual or "the other" (ibid 70). The story in the present study is a testimony and the other in this case, is the reader who is doing bearing witness to that testimony, in other words, the reader here is the other to whom the process of testimony is in a very need in order to take place. According to Laura Sasu's statement, the testimonial narrative arises in the form of speech and writings, in this sense, the circumstances of the events in reality are going to be reproduced. Accordingly, the events of the text which are the events of the pandemic or occur as a result

of it, have been reproduced once again in the fictional form as a testimony narrating a story of traumatic experiences. (Laura 8). In his paper, *Chernobyl Prayer As Lived Dystopia: A Signifier for COVID Times*, Sindhu J. enumerates "Alexievich's work gains significance as an example of witness literature, which attempts to recover lost narratives in the context of catastrophic suffering". Then, the paper draws a comparison between the catastrophe and the pandemic as both events, testimonial narratives. (Sindhu J. 2-6). Accordingly, Roger Kurtz in *Trauma and Literature*, argues that forms like; testimonials, confessionals, and memoirs had been intersected with literature, trauma, place, and memory. In other words, each literary element which is concerned with the traumatic experiences belongs to the testimonial narratives, or even includes parts of that traumatic concept. Kurtz, in a comment on a mythical Greek legend in which "the building collapsed during an earthquake, crushing everybody in it", he claims that "it can be described as the mythical origin of testimony in the face of trauma" (Kurtz 140). Consequently, both of the stories, Apple's COVID-19 and the Greek legend, and their characters, share traumatic experiences to the extent that makes them aligned within the testimonial narratives. Furthermore, being within the same trajectory of the bearing witness process as an essential traumatic notion, when taking Landsberg's statement into account, a kind of echoing argument is reached to, that is, they are aligned under the notion Alison Landsberg posits, the notion is what is so called "The prosthetic memory" (Landsberg 2). which means the traumatic experienced and represented by an individual who never lived it, nor does he experience the situation verbally, accordingly, such a statement could be linked to the above argument, which argues that readers of the traumatic fictional texts of literature, including those tackling COVID-19 experiences, in doing so they are doing bearing witness by means of reading such texts, so the present argument belongs to the notion of the "prosthetic memory". Moreover, Landsberg, as if presenting a condition for such a case to take place, he claims that it takes place only when

this person who does so "is able to build a strong personal link between his/her subjectivity and the traumatic memory" (Laurea 6). In this regard, the reader is deemed a bearing witness participant for the traumatic testimony only when he/she balances his personal subjectivity and the traumatic memory to the extent that achieves a kind of objectivity.

After she has been informed by her mother that her father has the same symptoms of the virus, Samantha now at Dr. Falkner's house, she was really shocked, at the beginning she pretends as if nothing happens, thus in this case she is acting out her traumatic experience, she was watching phone, seems anxious, and as if something danger has happened. But later, Dr. Falkner insisted "Sam, are you alright?". This question is the key that led to the process of her working-through, since she decides to tell Dr. Falkner what happened to her father, a case that shocks her, while she is narrating what happens to him, "Samantha began to cry". The process of crying is a kind of abreaction, i.e. the first step in the working through process, as it is depicted by Dominick LaCapra "I have argued elsewhere that mourning might be seen as a form of working through" (LaCapra 65). Moreover, such a case occurred as a result of COVID-19 because the symptoms her father has, are the same symptoms of the virus, which are the same that Bitia has, the Persian cleaning lady, who died after she has been infected with the virus, and Mrs. Kong too, she was tested positive of the virus, but hardly survived. In this regard, COVID-19 is the main reason behind such traumatic experience that Samantha has, but she is doing working-through when she told Dr. Falkner about everything, instead if she decides to keep it secret and tells him nothing, in this case, she is acting out her traumatic sense, as she attempted to do at the beginning. (Apple 76-77). From a deconstructive angle, and according to Derrida's statement, this scene combines both processes, acting out and working through, as binary oppositions. To quote Derrida "relation without relation", Despite those two contradicted concepts are quite apart in processes and procedures, they are relevant to each other in a case that each one completes the

other, and they are combined in a point that shapes one meaning (Derrida 29). Within this respect, the present case is going to be lined within the branch of the literary criticism that is so called by Jacques Derrida and Paul De Man as the "Post-structuralist Studies" which is a major branch of the trauma studies, whose major objective is to analyze the impacts of trauma on literature and culture. (Laurea 5). As a consequence of the aforementioned statement, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are going to be listed across those traumatic to be tackled within what is so called as the "Trauma Studies". As for Dominick LaCapra, and from a deconstructive perspective, he claims that most of the modern writings, arts, as well as, modern criticism being elaborated on those writings and arts that are listed under the umbrella of deconstruction, they all "often seem to be traumatic writing or post-traumatic writing in closets proximity to trauma"

(LaCapra 23-24).

The crew members on the cruise ship are repressing their traumatic experience and ignoring their senses of fear that all raised as a result of COVID-19, they are getting afraid of the virus and death, but they are repressing that fear, as it comes in the text "They had become afraid of their lives but could not talk to anyone... ". (100). In doing so, they are acting out their fears that resulted in their traumatic senses. They have no ability to abreact that experiences and that senses of fear. In this case, they aren't working-through, additionally, they aren't healing themselves from the traumatic sense that COVID-19 caused for them, but instead, they are acting-out. According to Giesen's statement "Therefore collective traumas, too, require a time of trauma before they can be acted out, spoken about, and worked through" (Giesen 116). i.e. such traumatic sense that overwhelms the atmosphere on the cruise ship, resulting in a collective trauma that leads to a kind of latency, in other words, the members on the cruise ship are acting out that traumatic experience in the shape of repressing and delaying that experience at the time of its occurrence. Another evidence suggesting the idea of

escaping from the miserable and traumatic reality takes place on the cruise ship. Now Robert is determined as a positive case of COVID-19, so he is under the obligatory quarantine in another cabin away from Emily. Consequently, as a way of escaping the situation, "She flipped TV channels, hoping to see some Korean drama, but she could not find one" (83). Hence, the process of flipping the TV, and "hoping to find a Korean drama" suggest the matter that Emily attempts to escape from reality, that is, she is traumatized, but she could not verbalize her traumatic experience, moreover, she is repressing it.

The Chinese might be deemed to confront a mandatory repression, for they are in a traumatic experience of COVID-19 pandemic, as it is suggested in the following lines "On April 8, the people came out massively, taking highways, trains, buses, and airplanes ..." (137). Such a process of massive coming out overwhelmingly could be regarded as a process of working-through, they have been locked down obligatorily for about 76 days at homes, thus in this case they are acting out their traumatic experiences out of the pandemic, then when they were allowed to come out in such a massive way, it gives a sense of the working-through process, as if they are abreacting what has been repressed inside themselves during all that period of the obligatory quarantine. The quotation above gives a sense of articulation by means of the fictional action, it depicts how those people in a very need to articulate their experiences eagerly, but their articulation here takes the shape of actions and behaviors like "came out massively, taking highways, trains, buses, and airplanes". Accordingly, this process of articulation is involved in the process of working through, as it is stated by Dominick LaCapra "Working through involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation ..." (LaCapra 42). Whatever pours in the field of abreaction and articulation; speeches, deeds, behaviors, actions, words, crying etc they are all involved within the working through process that is enacted as a result of the traumatic experience. Hence what the Chinese people do in the previous scene is a kind of working through following the

traumatic experience they have experienced out of COVID-19 pandemic.

Samantha is a traumatized individual whose memory is disturbed, resulting in a case that her conceptive and recognized abilities are going to be fragmented, so, that traumatic experience would seem odd for the usual system of her common memory, in other words, each traumatic experience she lives with the dead bodies of COVID-19 cases is going to deviate from the normal state of the memory. (Leys 298). Samantha was surrounded with a variety of items that result in her traumatic sense. She is traumatized by the dead bodies she had just done autopsy for, by means of attempting to get rid of those memories, she is attempting to get rid of that traumatic experience that she couldn't verbalize at the moment of its occurrence, since the elderly dead body of the 80 year lady is a positive COVID-19 case, it results in trauma for Samantha. Even the smell of the decomposed bodies are still stuck in her brain, this means that she suffers the trauma of the psychological wound in her mind. Moreover, within her attempt to cut her hair that still contains the decomposed smell, she tries to heal herself, consequently, she is doing a working-through process.

At the moment when Ed came back from China with the virus for developing a vaccine, "He could not wait to talk to Samantha" (202). Since Ed is traumatized of transporting the virus from China to the US, that is, the fear of carrying the virus in the luggage, resulted in a traumatic experience. So it is a traumatic moment. Consequently, as for his need to talk to his girlfriend Samantha, he is in a very need for doing the working through process, in order to heal himself from the traumatic sense he has just experienced. In this sense, what Ed has experienced is what Dori Laub, M.D. calls as "limited working through" in a coauthored book with Soshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. This case is imputed to the manner that his girlfriend doesn't react with him since she didn't open the door for him, so his need for the process of working through is going to be limited, or in other words refuted, thus he wouldn't be able to abreact nor could he mourn

what has been repressed inside himself. (Laub and Felman 76).

Chapter 41 in the novel, it seems as if the chapter is mainly dedicated for the working through process, as the title itself suggests "Unwinding the Stresses". It is quite apparent throughout the title which is an interpretation of the process. Moreover, the major event on the chapter is the psychiatric consultation Samantha was having with Dr. Song. She has such consultations online, as a process of healing by means of narrating everything she suffers to Dr. Song. Thus, by means of narrating her story and her burdens, she is doing a working through. Furthermore, the text gives an evidence directly, suggesting that Samantha is really doing working through, "She already felt much better just talking to someone ..." (209). The aforementioned line needs no more elaboration on the manner Samantha is really attempting to heal her traumatic wound out of the pandemic. Relevantly, it is found out that such a process leading to another key concept in the theory, most obviously, Samantha is doing working through, that is, abreacting her stresses and traumatic experiences by means of talking to the psychiatric Dr. Song, in this case, Dr. Song herself is doing bearing witness for Samantha's story, hence, accordingly, this process of listening that Dr. Song does with Samantha contributes in making a sense of cross cultural consistency between the two, since each one is a representative of a certain community, as it is stated by Carps "listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community" (Carps 46). This sense is going to result in shaping a sense of collective trauma between communities, that collective trauma is emanated as a consequence of COVID-19 pandemic which spreads around all over the world, so it results in a sharing collective trauma among the world communities. It is worth referring that Samantha isn't completely abreacting "Even though Samantha could not share every aspect of herself" (212). The line suggests that Samantha is repressing certain parts of her traumatic story, that is, there is a kind of another opposing concept to the

working through, that is acting out. Throughout the very speech that shows the way Samantha gets better when talking to someone, such a matter had been suggested by Rene Girard in which it is stressed that the traumatized individual is going to be full of stresses and disorders from that traumatic experiences he got in a certain period in the past. In this sense, that traumatic past needs to be worked through, relevantly, Samantha needs to work through her traumatic past which has been traumatized as a result of COVID-19 epidemic. (Girard 45). According Greenberg and van der Kolk in Retrieval and Integration of Traumatic Memories with the 'Painting Cures', Samantha's need for talking to the pathologist Dr. Song would be interpreted due to what they state, that "Pathologies of memory are characteristics features of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (Greenberg and van der Kolk 191). In this regard, the aforementioned scene of the novel suggests that Samantha is passing by the post-traumatic stress disorder as a consequence of what she has experienced during the previous periods, thus her memory requires pathology, which is a process that is regarded as a characteristic of the (PTSD).

Conclusion

The novel implies processes of healing and abreaction from the traumatic experiences and senses of the pandemic, such processes like the psychiatric consultation Samantha was having Dr. Song. That process by itself is an adequate evidence for the representation of more than one traumatic concept, i.e. working through that Samantha does, bearing witness that Dr. Song does with her, and the process of testimonial narrative by means of telling her story about the trauma of COVID-19. Furthermore, the story also involves the processes of ignoring, repressing, and acting out. Hence, the study would claim that the processes of working through and acting _as traumatic concepts_ are represented in the novel.

According to the argument the study raises, that the whole text is regarded as a testimonial

narrative, which is a story tackling the traumatic experiences of the pandemic, it is figured up that it could be regarded so. Readers of such a text are doing bearing witness as if they are listening to that testimony when they read the novel which is full of the traumatic experiences of the pandemic. Such cases are apparent throughout the manner the omniscient narrator is delving deeply inside the characters' minds and their inner selves. Throughout the behaviors and deeds of the characters it is easily noticed that they practice the processes of working through and acting out, all such occurs as a result of the pandemic and its consequences. Even the procedures of the mandated quarantine in both countries; America and China, are to be regarded as involving of the processes. As with the temporal structure of trauma, most of the events and movements the characters do inside the text are involving at the two processes in one way or another, likewise Ed, Samantha, Emily, the members on the cruise ship and the rest of characters. Moreover, there are certain chapters as if they are dedicated for each concept, for instance chapter 41 which is entitled "Unwinding the Stress", it gives the sense of the working through process.

Moreover, the processes of working through and acting out, as it is argued within the body of the study, they aren't necessarily confined to the act of speech, but rather they might be represented by a means of various techniques; likewise events, deeds, and behaviors the individual characters do. That case has been represented in the text in more than one state and position across the story. In certain cases, the processes of working through and acting out regarding the traumatic experiences of the traumatized individuals, the two concepts aren't to be regarded as opposed sides, rather they complete each other. While in certain other cases, they contradict each other.

COVID-19 as a traumatic experience, has resulted in experience involving the major concepts of the trauma theory, among those concepts are working through and acting out which have been well noticed across the whole story of the tackled text within the present paper. That case is suggested in accordance to

various ways; speeches, events, behaviors, and quotations, then they are all to be linked to the statements and arguments of the theory and its major figures and theorists. All of such statements are integrated with the text and its speeches and quotations to the extent that results in a new harmonious statement the present paper comes up with.

Reference

- [1] -Al Doory, Awfa. Verbalizing the Wounds: A Study of Trauma in Selected Narratives. Ph.D. dissertation (2018).
- [2] -Apple, Sophia K. COVID-19: Gripping Novel Inspired by Real Events. MD ISBN 9798574542033. 2020.
- [3] -Craps, Stef. Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds. Basingstoke and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan (2013).
- [4] -Derrida, Jacques. Gift of Death. Trans. David Wells. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1995).
- [5] -Ganteau, J. M. and S. Onega. Contemporary Trauma Narratives: Liminality and The Ethics of Form. New York, NY: Routledge (2014)
- [6] -Giesen, B. The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of the German National Identity. Cultural Trauma and Collective Trauma. Eyerman, Ron, and Alexander C. Jeffrey (eds.), University of California Press (2004).
- [7] -Girard, R. Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World. Trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press (1987).
- [8] -Greenberg, Mark S., and Bessel A. van der Kolk. Retrieval and Integration of Traumatic Memories with the 'Painting Cures'. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press (1987)
- [9] -Gunther, L. S. War Experience and Trauma in American Literature: A Study of American Military Memoirs of Operation Iraqi Freedom. New York: Lang (2014).
- [10] -LaCapra, Dominick. Writing History, Writing Trauma. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. (2001)
- [11] -Landsberg, A. Prosthetic Memory. The Transformation of American

- Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture. New York NY: Columbia University Press. (2004)
- [13] -Laub, D. and Felman, S. Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History. New York: Routledge (1992).
- [15] -Laub, Dori. Bearing Witness or The Vicissitude of Listening. New York and London: Routledge (1992).
- [16] -Laura, Sasu. Witness Literature: A Conceptual Framework. Bulletin of the Transilvania, University of Brasov. Series IV, Philology and Cultural Studies. Vol. 6 No. 2. (2013)
- [17] -Laurea, T. The Representation of Trauma in Literature: Jackie Kay's The Lamplighter and Primo Levi's Se questo e un uomo.
- [18] -Leys, R. Trauma: A Genealogy. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press (2000)
- [19] -Kurtz, J. Roger. Trauma and Literature. Cambridge University Press (2018).
- [20] -Seilder, V. Jeleniewski. Remembering 9/11: Terror, Trauma and Social Theory. London: Saffron House. (2013)
- [21] -Sindhu, J. Chernobyl Prayer As Lived Dystopia: A Signifier for COVID Times. Research Journal Of English (RJOE). Vol. 6, Issue. 2, 2021.