

Trauma and PTSD in the lens of Cathy Caruth: A Parallel Reading on Elizabeth Strout's *The Burgess Boys* and Preeti Shenoy's *Life is What you Make it*

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Abstract

The monitoring of one's mental health should be given the same amount of attention as one's physical health. One example of a problem that might arise with a person's mental health as a result of a traumatic event in their life is psychological trauma. The aftermath of a traumatic experience is contingent upon the degree of sensitivity of the person. Internal and external elements, such as despair, fear, guilty conscience, and the importance of friends and family in a person's life all have a part in determining whether or not that person may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The aftermath of post-traumatic stress disorder can range from relatively minor emotional upheaval to an increased risk of suicide. The protagonists in Elizabeth Strout's book *The Burgess Boys* (2013) suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the horrible experiences that occurred throughout their lives. In a related manner, the Indian writer Preeti Shenoy, in her work of fiction titled *Life is What you Make it* (2011), draws attention to the psychological pain that her main character, Ankita Sharma, goes through. The characters from a selection of books are used in this article to study the consequences of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study is based on the theoretical postulations of American Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth.

Keywords: Trauma, Mental Health, Guilty Conscience, PTSD, Cathy Caruth.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma is derived from the Greek word *trauma*, which means "wound." Though it originally referred to a physical wound, Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud changed the definition to "harm inflicted not on the body but on the mind" (Caruth, 3). The psychological consequences of the traumatic event might result in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can cause stress, despair, fear, helplessness, significant mental disease, and, in some cases, suicide. According to studies, "PTSD is a severe anxiety disorder that can occur after being exposed to any psychologically traumatic incident" (Sharma,

2). Individual differences can be observed in the development of the symptoms of PTSD that varies from mild emotional turmoil to committing suicide. When individuals are traumatised at the younger age, they experience terrible behavioural and mental changes, which turns their lives topsy-turvy.

Both internal and external factors like depression, fear, guilty conscience, the role of friends and family influences a person towards the development of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The purpose of this research is to examine the nature and impact of trauma and PTSD, as well as how they cause tragic occurrences in the lives of the characters. For

this purpose, the novels namely *The Burgess Boys* (2013) by American novelist Elizabeth Strout and *Life is What you Make it* (2011) by Indian author Preeti Shenoy are taken for analysis. The selected novels are studied under the theoretical propositions of Cathy Caruth, who has proceeded from Freud's ideology.

Along with Freud's development of the theory of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the twentieth century, the field of trauma studies began to thrive in the literary arena. Cathy Caruth, an American Trauma theorist, emerged from the Freudian tradition and uses her works to amplify the theoretical postulations of Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Caruth is a part of the Freudian school of thought. Cathy Caruth has made numerous outstanding contributions to the field of Trauma studies. Some of these contributions include the books *Empirical Truths and Critical Fictions: Locke, Wordsworth, Kant, and Freud* (1991), *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), and *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (1999). Cathy Caruth has received a great deal of praise for her work in this area (2014). According to the British historian Dan Stone, "Trauma studies has become something of an interdisciplinary subject in its own right, partly because of the contributions of Cathy Caruth," and this is largely due to the work of Cathy Caruth (Glaser). Jonathan Culler, a prominent literary critic in the United States, has said that "Caruth was one of the first to realise the relevance of trauma theory for the humanities" (Glaser). "An overpowering experience of unexpected or catastrophic occurrences in which the response to the incident happens in the frequently delayed, uncontrolled recurring appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena," says Cathy Caruth (Caruth, 11). Similarly, in light of Caruth, the condition of PTSD can be comprehended. She proposes the concept of 'dissociation,' in which the victim becomes cognitively detached from the traumatic experience as it occurs. Instead, it later reverts with great vigour. "Post-traumatic stress disorder reflects the direct imposition on the

mind of the unavoidable reality of awful events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event over which it has no control," Caruth explains (Caruth, 58). According to Caruth, the grief aroused by an external source impels internal changes in the mind and thereby irreversibly changes one's identity. This phenomenon of identity crisis can be observed among the characters in the selected novels. Owing to the impact of the traumatic events in their lives, the characters shadow their real self and lead undesirable pseudo lives. In parallel, the traumatic event takes over the mind of the characters, which hinders the rational betterment of their lives.

The American author Elizabeth Strout is famous for the psychological interpretation of characters in her works. Her popular novels include *Amy and Isabelle* (1998), *Abide with Me* (2006), *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), *The Burgess Boys* (2013), *My Name is Lucy Barton* (2016) and *Olive, Again* (2019). For her novel *Olive Kitteridge*, Strout received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2009. In her novel *The Burgess Boys*, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder collapses the lives of the Burgess brothers namely Jim Burgess and Bob Burgess. The tragic incident that happened during their childhood ruins their whole life.

The silly mistake done by Jim during his childhood days haunts the lives of Jim and Bob even when they become old. When Jim was eight years old and Bob was four years old, their father took them in a car. When their father walked down the driveway leaving them in the car, Jim playfully started the car, which hit their father and he passed away on the spot. Jim gets frightened and makes up a story that Bob is the one who started the car. Since Bob is the younger one, he is made to believe that he is the wrongdoer. Owing to this incident, both Jim and Bob endures guilty conscience for more than half of their lives. In the case of Jim and Bob, the effect of PTSD is the sense of guilt, which has a strong presence in their minds. In a way, it acts as a hurdle to lead a normal life. As Freud states, "the obstacle of an unconscious sense of guilt . . . as the most powerful of all obstacles to recovery" (Freud, 390-391).

The PTSD of Jim hugely affects his personal life. As the feeling of guilt invariably stays in his mind, he is unable to mingle with his family members. It prohibits him from speaking his mind even to his kindred and thus overshadowing his real self. In order to stay away from his children, he puts his three children in the hostel. Though he knows that they miss their home, Jim keeps him that way. Towards his wife Helen, he does not share many things. Even when they go for a trip, Jim merrily spends his time playing golf, while poor Helen has to accompany the irritating wife of Jim's partner, whom she almost hates. Even when Jim was a student in law college, he preferred to be alone and his classmate described him as "unknowable" (Strout, 130). As Jim suppresses his emotions even from his family, it kindles him to develop an extramarital affair which ultimately backfired on him.

The effect of PTSD in Bob makes him desperate, which ruins both his professional and personal life. Bob considers himself as a criminal, which makes him submissive throughout his life. Jim unflinchingly teases Bob using foul language such as "knucklehead" (Strout, 34), "slobdog" (Strout, 35) and Bob never defends it. In fact, Bob accepts that he is incapable in his endeavours. Bob too works in a law firm. However, he is in a lower rank as compared to Jim and often changes his position, which displays his inconsistent nature. Bob and his wife Pam are made for each other couple. Even Jim asserts, "Pam is Bob's family" (Strout, 105). But they get separated, which Bob himself later realises that "his earlier inability . . . had irritated Pam" (Strout, 354).

Similarly, the Indian author Preeti Shenoy explicates the impact of PTSD in her novel *Life is What you Make it* (2011) through the character Ankita Sharma. Shenoy is an eminent novelist and a distinguished celebrity in India. Her famous novels include *Life is What you Make it* (2011), *Tea for Two* and *A Piece of Cake* (2012), *The Secret Wish List* (2012), *It Happens for a Reason* (2014), *A Hundred Little Flames* (2017) and *Wake Up, Life Is Calling* (2019). Shenoy's narrative

revolves around the psychological implications of her characters, due to the unexpected circumstances in their lives.

In the novel *Life is What you Make it*, the protagonist Ankita Sharma endures PTSD due to her complex love relationship. For Ankita, PTSD culminates in the development of fatal mental illness namely Bipolar Disorder, which triggers suicidal tendencies in her. Preeti Shenoy has purposely dealt with Bipolar Disorder and in an interview, she explains the reason for taking Bipolar Disorder as a theme in the novel – "Bipolar Disorder is steadily gaining recognition in India, but it is still seen as a taboo subject in most homes. The novel is based on a genuine story that impacted me so greatly when I first heard it that I determined it needed to be written and shared with the world.." (Krishnakumar).

The traumatic event occurred in Ankita's life during her college days, due to her relationship with Abhishek. Ankita and Abhishek meet in a cultural festival and Abhishek falls in love with her at the first sight. Though Ankita insists that she is already in love with Vaibhav, he never believes it and considers Ankita as his world. They meet often and Ankita too loves his company. But when Abhishek suggests that they should get married, Ankita clearly states that she has to pursue her dream of doing MBA and is not ready to marry him. Abhishek is completely taken aback by Ankita's response and he commits suicide. This event leaves a mark in Ankita's life, who considers herself guilty for the death of Abhishek.

Ankita faces serious symptoms of PTSD when she moves to Bombay to do her MBA course. It includes changes in both physical and mental states. In order to repress the thoughts of the traumatic event, Ankita pays greater attention to physical fitness and her studies. However, changes in her are obvious, as her classmate Joseph comments, "You looked kind of maniac, this morning" (Shenoy, 85). Even in her studies, as she feels, "I studied like a maniac" (Shenoy, 89). This marks the beginning stage of the Bipolar Disorder in Ankita. As Dubey comments,

She[Ankita] is diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder, a mental illness characterised by severe mood swings that alternate between two phases: the manic period, in which the affected is bursting with energy and high spirits, and the depression phase, which frequently leads to suicidal impulses. (Dubey, 435)

Adolescence is a sensitive period in one's life. As Chitra says, "Adolescence is a period of joy and happiness and of great excitability of emotion. He will be moody. There are two sides of behaviour. He may laugh at one time but at the same time he shed tears. Hence highest instability is seen in this period" (Chitra, 29). In this phase, Ankita loses balance in her life due to the tragic circumstances. Gradually, Ankita suffers from terrible insomnia.

Parental guidance plays a significant role when one loses focus in life. Even when the children make mistakes, it is the responsibility of the parents to guide them in a proper way. Parents' guidance is highly significant during the period of youth, especially when they are psychologically affected. As Ackard points out, "For youth, feeling connected to their families is an important anchor, and many do turn to parents for information and guidance" (Ackard, 59). In the case of Ankita, she lacks the guidance and support of the parents, when she needs the most. Ankita's parents discover the love letters written by Vaibhav and Abhishek in her cupboard. They are reluctant to listen to Ankita and scolds her furiously. They even burn the love letters in front of her. As Ankita feels, "I was at their mercy and they were unrelenting, harsh and unforgiving" (Shenoy, 118).

The grating reaction from her parents further crumbles Ankita's soul, which upshots in the suicidal tendencies. Only when Ankita attempts suicide, her parents realise the intensity of her problem. So, Ankita gets admitted in the National Mental Health Institute, where she gets proper treatment. The hopeful words from Dr. Madhusudan and the support from her parents hastens her recovery. Ankita gets discharged from the hospital with full of hope to begin a new phase in her life.

In the novels *The Burgess Boys* and *Life is What you Make it*, the origin of the development of PTSD is the sense of guilt, which aroused from a traumatic experience in their lives. According to research, "Guilt is a cognitive or an emotional experience that occurs when a person realizes or believes accurately or not – that he or she has violated a moral standard, and bears significant responsibility for that violation. It is closely related to the concept of remorse" (Jain, 33). In the select novels, the characters Jim Burgess, Bob Burgess and Ankita Sharma suffer from a guilty conscience as a result of a traumatic event in their lives. In conformity with Caruth's statement, PTSD acts as a huge impediment in their progress by taking over minds of the characters and even camouflage their identity. However, when the characters get relieved from the feeling of guilt when they realise the truth, they lead a contented life. Through these characters, the readers understand that the effects of PTSD should not be ignored. It can be remedied through proper physical and mental care.

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