

A STUDY OF CULTURAL TRAUMA IN BRANDON HOBSON'S NOVEL THE REMOVED

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ABSTRACT

The present study is aimed at investigating Brandon Hobson's novel The Removed from the perspective of cultural trauma as presented by Jeffery C. Alexander in his essay titled as: Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma. As the given novel is written in the backdrop of Cherokee Indian community's removal from Oklahoma, it sheds lights on massive suffering and subsequent cultural trauma of the said community. As per Jeffery, cultural trauma takes place when a horrendous event leaves indelible marks on community's consciousness, shaking its foundation of cultural identity in irrevocable ways. Similarly, this novel presents aftershocks of Ray-Ray Echota's murder which shakes social fabric of Echota family, causing physical, mental and social disintegration in the entire family. Ray-Ray's memories keep on wounding psyche of all members of the family through flashbacks, association of ideas and remains of his room, making them re-experience the catastrophic event. Likewise, Tsala, a late Cherokee ancestor's narrative gives historical view of community's suffering after promulgation of government's The Indian Removal Act of 1830's. The characters in the novel under present discussion adopt certain acts of defense mechanism to lessen impact of being traumatized. This study proves that series of catastrophic events bring about cultural trauma, making disintegration in basic fabric of social and cultural lives of the sufferers.

Keywords: Brandon Hobson, The Removed, Collective trauma, Jeffery C. Alexander

Introduction

The present study is aimed at analyzing Brandon Hobson's novel, *The Removed*, through the lens of cultural trauma, given in Jeffery C. Alexander's essay titled as: *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*. This particular essay is found in a collaborated book: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004). Jeffery defines cultural trauma as: 'Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, making their members forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.' Alexander, 2004, p.1). Trauma theory takes roots in the works of Cathy Caruth. Caruth (1996) puts it: "The (traumatic) event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (p.4). Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* is recently published novel which revolves around the lives of Cherokee Indian community who have been subject to removal, extermination and massacre throughout their history in Quah, Oklahoma, right from 1838 to the September 6 when young Ray-Ray Echota is killed by a police officer, Vin Hoff. His death brings unbearable loss to Echota family which fails to cope with the flashbacks. Parents i.e. Earnest Echota, Maria Echota and their children namely Edgar Echota and Sonja Echota receive psychic wounds which shake and disintegrate the entire family. The characters experience hypertension, insomnia, depression, ruptured memory, hallucinations and loneliness in their lives.

At vast canvas, it depicts traumatizing experiences of Cherokee Indian community who have been forcefully removed from their lands in Oklahoma, USA. Tsala, a famous Cherokee

ancestor who had refused to leave his lands, was brutally killed along with his family. As a representative of his race, he becomes voice of his brethrens, getting killed for centuries. In order to cope with the trauma, living characters from Echota family adopt defense mechanism in the form of pills, drugs, visions, and pleasure giving activities. The novel under current study consists of man an instance which depicts cultural trauma of Cherokee Indians whose members suffer from cataclysmic event, making them traumatized in collectivity. The characters who represent Cherokees are lost in their past which is nothing but bloodshed, mass torture and removal from their own lands. Descendants of the given community re-experience the traumatizing events through flashbacks which give irrevocable loss to their social life. Hence, it is proved that Hobson's novel under this study consists in cultural trauma as well as defense mechanism adopted by Cherokee Indian community. Investigation of cultural trauma is much important as it establishes a relationship between a horrendous event and collective suffering of a community. It suggests the researchers to see extensive impact of traumatizing events in art and literature.

Literature Review

Review of literature, is basically, an attempt to give comprehensive information about body of literature with reference to the work and the theory under current research. In other words, literature review gives inclusive information about previous research carried out on Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* and cultural trauma. The same background knowledge enables the current researcher to find out research gap so that validity and authenticity of this research may be established. It is a gist of some research endeavours as given under:

John Domini (2021) in a literary review titled as *In an Earie Cherokee novel, the Ghosts and the Grieving have Their say* identifies ghosts, sufferings and pain in the lives of people belonging to Cherokee community. It is because their youngest son Ray-Ray Echota murdered by a police personnel, Vin Hoff. Consequently, the entire family remains in grief. It fosters the grief for one and half decade till the novel comes to an end. The given reviewer finds the inability of Echota family to come out of distress and disappointment. With the passage of time, the elderly members fantasize their past and fall prey to superstitions and visions of their lost son. They keep on watching ghosts of their son. It increases their worries and Cherokee National Holiday is eclipsed by death of beloved Ray-Ray Echota. The pain continues and overshadows every other aspect of their lives. Sarah Rachel Egelman (2021) in a review develops background information about *The Removed* so that the readers may develop readable information about the novel. As per reviewer, the current novel is a mixture of realistic as well mythical depiction of historical events about Indian community in Oklahoma. The current review highlights sufferings of Indian community that has always been targeted by the government. The review provides a link between past and the present scenario of Indians who have suffered more than they deserve. There is reference to tragedy of Tsala who was murdered along with his family. The main part of the given review is about Echota family whose Ray-Ray Echota is murdered in a police shooting. It also highlights the shock that has worsened the personal and social lives of the characters from Echota family. Sara finds love and longing which is sandwiched between genocide and sufferings of Cherokee Indian community.

Marcela Davison Aviles (2021) presents a book review with the title: *Powerful 'Removed' Walk a Path between Memory and Mourning*. A woman of renown literary and professional

caliber, she explores lyrics, beauty and culture in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed*. The review begins with the historical significance of national ritual when Cherokee Indian community celebrates national anthem. The return of the same day, instead of bringing happiness, induces the family to unpack trauma of ray-ray's loss. Hence, the story is mixture of myth, traditions, folklore and sufferings of the community. The reviewer gives historical account of the genocide of various factions of Cherokee Indians whom U.S. government removed from their ancestral lands from 1830 to 1850. There is presence of Cherokee myth, history and unforgettable memory. It gives detailed view of the sufferings of Echota family. Earnest suffers from Alzheimer whereas his children are addicted to drugs, sensual pleasures and alienation. The arrival of annual Cherokee National Holiday drags them between their past and present. Their past and present are full of misfortune and removal. Eric Taylor Woods in an article titled as *Cultural trauma: Ron Everyman and the Founding of a New Research Paradigm*, explores main features of cultural trauma as presented by Everyman in his essay along with some fellows. The researcher elaborates relationship between an event and cultural trauma which is seen in the form of collective memory of the sufferers. According to the Eric, cultural trauma is manifested in its intrinsic nature to collective life. Cultural occurs when collective group suffers from recurring event which reshape or abrogates the collective identity of the suffering group. Some forms of cultural traumas divide communities by raising a question of their identity.

Zhang Chunming in an article *Doris Lessing's Cultural Trauma and Traumatic Writing* analyzes presence of cultural trauma in the writings of Doris Lessing. One of the reasons of traumatic themes is her personal experiences of her own life. The migration and her interaction with other cultures bring about cultural confusion in her life. Being a witness to more than one culture, she appears to be a successful writer who began writing about trauma of her nation. As a wandering soul between two cultures, she finds a sense of heredity in her cultural traits. She feels to be uprooted from her own culture after she has embraced some features of a foreign culture. The said researchers and reviewers have attempted to explore various perspectives of Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* and cultural trauma. Their scholarly findings carry weight because they have served the existing body of knowledge through their valuable contribution. However, it is also found that significant research gap exists as *The Removed* has not been seen through the lens of cultural trauma as described by Jeffery C. Alexander. The current study fulfills the said research gap.

1.3 Thesis Statement

Even a cursory glance at Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* is enough to give a strong impression that it can be investigated from the perspective of cultural trauma as presented by Jeffery C. Alexander in his essay: *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*. As the entire novel is about whole collective suffering of Indian community, it shows strong relation between the text and the theory under current analysis.

1.4 Objectives of the Research

1. To investigate manifestations of cultural trauma in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed*
2. To explore characters in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* using defense mechanism

1.5 Research Questions

1. What makes Brandon Hobson's novel *The Removed* a study of cultural trauma?
2. How do characters in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* use defense mechanism against trauma?

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical framework is being given in order to explain cultural trauma as a theory along with its relevance to Brandon Hobson's novel *The Removed*. Therefore, theoretical framework builds up foundation of the entire research process. Cultural trauma, as a theory, is taken from a collaborated work titled as *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004). The aforementioned book consists of as many as five theorists out of whom Jeffery C. Alexander's essay *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma* defines cultural traumas as follows: 'Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, making their members forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.' Alexander, 2004, p.1). In other words, cultural trauma pertains to such a body of literature in which one or more horrendous events provide irrevocable loss to a social group or a community. Such an event provides irreparable loss to the entirety of the social group. As a result, it leaves indelible mark on the group's consciousness. The suffering group re-experiences the event in the form of flashbacks and association of ideas. Instead of having impact on individuals, it casts piercing psychic wounds upon the suffering community and deprives it of social sense.

1.6 Research Methodology

The present research is a process to investigate Brandon Hobson's novel *The Removed* from the perspective of cultural trauma presented by Jeffery C. Alexander in his essay: *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*. The essay is included in a book titled as *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004). The given book is a joint work of as many as five theorists namely Jeffery C. Alexander, Ron Everyman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Pieter Sztompka. Published by University of California Press in Berkley, Los Angeles and London in the year 2004, this book is a collection of essays by the abovementioned theorists who have defined as well as explained cultural trauma, bringing about its strong impact on social as well as cultural bonds of a social group. The present research is qualitative in nature. It is based on thematic analysis of the given novel through the lens of cultural trauma. This research is inductive in spirit. Brandon Hobson's novel *The Removed* is a primary source of data for this study; whereas it takes other sources such as journals, dissertations, reviews, articles and other internet based means as secondary sources in order to analyze cultural trauma in the novel under current investigation.

Data Analysis

The current research is an attempt to analyze Brandon Hobson's novel *The Removed* from the perspective of cultural trauma as given by Jeffery C. Alexander in his essay *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*. In a co-authored work: *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Jeffery defines and explains cultural trauma as a cataclysmic event which brings about collective and irrevocable sufferings for a social group. As a thematic study, data analysis is aimed at comprehensive investigation of Brandon's Hobson's *The Removed* through the eye of cultural trauma. It is a detailed analysis which gives comprehensive answers to the two research questions mentioned earlier. The research questions are as under: i. What makes Brandon

Hobson's *The Removed* a study of cultural trauma? ii. How do characters in Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* use defense mechanism against trauma? In other words, data analysis is in accordance with the research objectives. In order to support the research, several extracts from the given novel have been quoted as reference. The novel under current study is about irrevocable sufferings of Cherokee Indian Community whose members have always faced everlasting mental and physical torture at the hands of government in the state of Oklahoma. The entire story of this novel pertains to Echota family in particular and Cherokee Indian community in general. As the community has faced unprecedented state led torture in which they have been deprived of their property, their lands and their lives, it all forms cultural trauma, decimating social fabric of their social life. Out of traumatized life, the members of the community adopt defense mechanism to lessen the impact of mental wounds, but of no avail. Wholesome sufferings have left the entire Indian community in panic individually as well as collectively i.e. culturally traumatized. Most of the story revolves around lives of all members of Echota family whose youngest son, Ray-Ray Echota, is killed by a police officer, Vin Hoff, in a targeted shooting. As a result, the whole family cannot ward off its impact and gets traumatized. Similarly, Tsala's narrative indicates sufferings and consequent cultural trauma of the entire Cherokee Indian Community whose members have faced death destruction for centuries.

The parents i.e. Earnest and Maria, and their children, Edgar and Sonja, manifest psychological dilemma of the entire Indian community, undergoing the same traumatizing experience in their lives. Soon after Ray-Ray's tragic murder, all members of Echota family experience mental wounds which form cultural trauma because it rips them apart in their personal and social lives. Henceforth, the Echota family fails to form itself as a union. Followed by Ray-Ray's killing at the hands of a police officer, the entire family faces painful mental injury which forms cultural trauma as is seen in the lives of the characters. This incident brings about everlasting mental wound on their psyche, making them disintegrated socially and culturally. Each member of the bereaved family fails to identify himself/herself in accordance with requirements of social bond. Their life is full of confusion, despair and anxiety. As a guardian, Earnest leads retarded life: full of day dreaming, nightmares and hallucination. It makes him alien to rest of his family. Similarly, Maria suffers from depression which forces her to have sleepless nights, recalling her son's absence. It makes her suffer from hypertension. Like his parents, Edgar's life is not without anxiety. He fails to consider himself a part of society of living human beings. Drugs and active romance are the only pleasure-giving activities which may smother his nerves. He remains asocial and keeps on running away from home in order to avoid his family. Like her brother, Sonja keeps on avoiding her own people in favour of stranger. She keeps on dating both men and boys. For fifteen years, they have been unable to adapt themselves in accordance with new circumstances. This all makes the young members aloof and strange to their kith and kin. Sonja submits to superstitious beliefs and represents the psyche of her ancestors as well: 'It worried me because Papa taught me that owls can be messengers of bad news. Papa had told me old Cherokee stories of dead people turning into owls and bringing warnings to people.' Such superstitious beliefs of turning human beings into owls depict the wounded psyche of the community. Similarly, Edgar believes in such irrational stories of the dead contacting their children. Edgar's words give warning of death as: 'MY DAD USED TO SAY the ringing in my ears was a sign the dead were trying to contact me. "Your ancestors," he said. "Listen to them. Pay attention to things around you."' These ideas express the traumatized nature of the young generation that has witnessed removal of their community.

The entire family suffers from hallucination which induces them to think irrationally. As the world of human beings is no more comforting, they take refuge in the world of supernatural machinery such as spirits of the dead ancestors. The mere resemblance of Wyatt makes Earnest suffer from hallucination and day dreaming. On seeing Wyatt, Earnest says, 'Is he giving any clues about the Spirit World? I think the Great Spirit may have sent Ray-Ray back to us in another form.' The elders from Echota family find themselves unmitigated from their suffering. Maria express emptiness as: 'On the drive home, the town felt quiet and isolated. The road took us past empty and decayed buildings, carrying us east towards the bridge leading to our house.' Tsala's words discuss the sufferings as, 'IN 1838, the firing squad killed you before they killed me. Your mother adorned us in gold and jewelry and buried us.' These words depict the cultural trauma that has deprived the community of their social bond. His ghost emerges as recollection of past experiences which ignites traumatizing impact of the past. Retelling of his story depicts collective suffering of the entire Indian community. Such large scale tragedy has shaken foundation of cultural bonds among the Cherokee Indians.

Emptiness prevails everywhere. The entire family fails to find any purpose in their lives. Maria speaks about her experiences as: 'I was consumed by an emptiness I tried to fill however I could: through prayers, meditation, and journaling.' By writing her experiences, Maria is able to have catharsis of her emotions. Earnest feels the same emptiness and is unable to give a smile or laugh after his son's unfortunate death. Maria speaks of her husband as, 'No memory, thought or quick-witted joke on TV ever made him laugh anymore.' Cultural trauma has, actually, deprived Echota family of living a unified family. Soon after Ray-Ray's death, the centre cannot hold them together. Absence of Ray-Ray deminishes all sort of attraction in the home. Sonja's condition is narrated as follows, 'Sonja, who was sixteen and the eldest sibling, was eccentric in her own way too, retreating to her room every day after school and staying there all night, rarely coming out.' These lines show how a traumatizing experience has ripped the social bond between all members of Echota family. Ray-Ray's death brings about communication gap in the family. The barrier of communication weakens social bond among them all. Earnest, the guardian, fails to have solid communication with others as: 'He never said much to me even before the Alzheimer's. Truthfully, we hardly ever talked at all.' Maria speaks about her husband's state as, 'He grew frustrated easily. He would forget little things like why he'd walked into a room. Whenever he did this, he would look down at the floor and struggle to understand.' Silence and meditation grip them all. It weakens cultural bond in the given family which represents Indian community.

Cultural trauma shifts the characters' attention from world of reality to world of visions. Maria's following words indicate her husband's anxiety as expressed through visions: 'For weeks he had been paranoid about someone watching their house. One night he sat on the deck for three hours, keeping a lookout for a burglar.' At the same time, Edgar is also gripped by visions as he imagines Sonja calling him back: 'Come home, Edgar. Mom and Papa want to see you, Edgar. What the hell are you doing, Edgar.' It shows confusion and perturbation in young characters who submit top visions. Characters in the novel under current study adopt certain measures which work as defense mechanism against the cultural trauma which has affected them socially. Maria narrates her husband as: 'He liked to just sit on his deck in silence and look out at the lake, the moonlight reflecting in the water. He always told me to pay attention to nature because it was

usually crying out to us.' Thus, the world of plants, herbs and other parts of nature is used as defense mechanism by traumatized family members to avoid side effects of cultural trauma.

Maria, who is mother of late Ray-Ray, uses her son's pictures as a source of relief from mental agony through which she is going. Maria speaks of her experience thus, 'I kept photo albums near my chair and looked at pictures of all my children, including Ray-Ray. My sister Irene said it would always help me feel better, and I was surprised to discover she was correct.' This shows how some members of Echota family use pictures of their deceased members as a part of defense mechanism. Hence, these pictures of Ray-Ray enable them to lessen the traumatizing absence of their youngest member. She again says, 'But many years ago the Cherokees used nature for healing.' Thus, Cherokee culture works as healing power as it worships and idealizes nature in time of distress and disappointment. Like her parents, Sonja Echota submits to opposite genders who provide her some company and pleasure. Such sensual activities provide her defense against the trauma she is in. Sonja admits as: 'I secretly watched Vin Hoff for month before I ever met him.' Sonja exclaims her fascination for Vin as: 'This was not love—let me be clear on that, though I had immediate attraction to him.' Being young and beautiful, she is able to attract and be attracted by boys and men. Thus, she avoids meeting her parents and prefers male company to that of her family. Sonja exclaims her experience as: 'Another time I rode my bicycle to the liquor store, and by coincidence, Vin was there. He was buying a bottle of wine.'

Sonja becomes escapist. Distance from family soothes her nerves. Sonja's escapism is depicted in her words as, 'In a way, I found it soothing, almost meditative. I wanted to believe that my goals were as important and necessary as this task seemed for the octopus.' She attempts to follow a lesson of hope from octopus. Besides, she falls in love with amorous writings of Collette in order to treat her mental wounds. Sonja's words express her intentions behind amorous relations as: 'I thought of how Colette described the men in her books in such ardent, sexual detail, so full of passion. How she focused on her own pleasures. Oh, to be so selfish! I desired Vin the same way.' This is how Sonja treats her psychic wounds by enjoying sensual pleasure from certain writings. Like other members of his family, Edgar uses certain options to release the psychic wound after he has witnessed his brother dead. He leaves his home in favour of a hotel where he either enjoys physical relations with his girl friend or he uses drugs to unburden painful memory of his brother's death. After he uses oxycodone, Edgar says: 'Doing pills had started as a way for me to avoid feeling miserable all the time...' At another time, Edgar himself says: 'I was a little high. I'd brought along a small duffel bag containing a bottle of a few oxycodone pills, aspirin, a tape recorder and a few cans of beer...These were all things I needed for the night.' In all, the discussion in data analysis has been much fruitful as it has established presence of cultural trauma, its side effects and defense mechanism.

Conclusion

Conclusion is a gist of comprehensive debate on data analysis as given above. Being a short summary of the entire discussion, the current study proves that Brandon Hobson's *The Removed* depicts cultural trauma of Cherokee Indian community which has faced massive genocide for centuries. At micro level, it is based on traumatized lives of Echota family whose youngest member, Ray-Ray Echota, is murdered by state operated machinery i.e. police. The tragic incident rips foundation of the entire family, reducing it into individuals. In order to cope with aftershocks of the traumatizing incident, the parents as well as children adopt certain measures as defense mechanism. The present research proves that cultural trauma dominates the entire novel

which revolves around post-trauma lives of Echota family in particular and Cherokee Indian community in general. The novel under present study retells the story about ethnic cleansing of Cherokees right from 1838 to present day September, 6 in Quah, Oklahoma where Ray-Ray Echota is shot dead by a police Officer, Vin Hoff. Consequently, the entire family of as many as four members receives psychic wounds which develop cultural trauma. Earnest Echota, his wife, Maria Echota, and their children namely Edgar Echota and Sonja Echota fail to get reunion for as many as fifteen years. Disintegration and dispersion prevail everywhere. Social, cultural and familial bond goes to pieces. They experience flashbacks, silence, stillness, hallucinations, visions and nightmares which worsen them mentally, physically and socially. Parents suffer from Alzheimer, hypertension, insomnia and lonely. Superstitions, ghosts, insomnia, depression, disunity, miscommunication and solitude rule the traumatized Echota family. Post-trauma scenario shakes the social fabric of the Echotas who fail to have get-together in future. The elders as well as the youths come under grip of flashbacks which make them re-experience the tragedy. Cherokee ancestor, Tsala, increases the intensity of cultural trauma by narrating genocidal removal of Cherokee Indians from Quaoah, Oklahoma. The entire family takes refuge in certain measures of defense mechanism against cultural trauma. Wine, cigarette, oxycodone pills, antidepressants, writing diary, herbs, Cherokee stories, day dreaming and wishful thinking are taken as defense mechanism. Earnest and Maria live in dreamy world, hoping for return of Ray-Ray Echota. Earnest and Maria depend upon antidepressants, pills and other mediation so that they may lessen mental agony, frustration and hypertension. Besides, they keep on recalling past in order to avoid present pain. Edgar keeps spending days and nights with his girlfriend, Desiree. Her company provides peace to his wounded psyche. He uses wine, cigarette, pills and oxycodone to calm his nerves. Sonja becomes escapist and joins boys and men to escape bitter world of reality. Her fascination for Colette and Vin Hoff is an attempt to defend herself from cultural trauma that has gripped the entire community.

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