

TRAUMATISED SOCIETY: A STUDY OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE EYES OF DUONG THU HUONG'S NOVEL *WITHOUT A NAME*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the cause and effect of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) within Duong Thu Huong's Novel without a Name. From the year 1955 to 1975, Vietnam suffered from the Indochina War or also known as the Vietnam War which lasted for almost 20 years. This event resulted in permanent scarring for the Vietnamese society when not just physical trauma occurred but also the psychological side of the society. Although the event in the novel happened during the war but the novel's plot took place during the final years of the war until the fall of Saigon. The traumatic experience depicted by the author can be seen from the era of French Revolution until the unification of North and South Vietnam. There are several studies had been done on the subject of PTSD especially for the Vietnam War's veteran (considering Vietnam War's veteran is a term for the American soldiers) but there are little studies or research had been done for the Vietnamese society. The interest of this paper is to study the cause of PTSD within the Vietnamese society through the novel. By utilizing both the psychological concept of PTSD and the traumatic literary theory, this paper managed to come up with a study which combines the two fields. The utilization of the traumatic concepts from both fields have shown that the Vietnamese society did suffer from their traumatic experience and the effect did not just affect the surface of the society but it goes much deeper.

Keywords: Duong Thu Huong, Novel without a Name, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Vietnam War, society.

Introduction

The Vietnam War also known as the Second Indochina War was fought in various Indochina countries such as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1st November 1955 until the fall of Saigon on 30th April 1975. It was a war between two factions namely the pro-Communist North Vietnam and the anti-Communist South Vietnam with the latter supported by the United States of America and also other anti-Communist countries. Due to the brutal environment of a war period, many soldiers suffered from traumatic experience and had to undergo a series of therapy in order for the healing process to have a positive effect on them. Since the Vietnam War ended nearly forty years ago, the only possible avenue to study the effects of trauma was through the writings of Vietnamese writers who experienced the war themselves. The book chosen for this study is *Novel Without a Name* by Duong Thu Huong because it depicts the Vietnamese society who lived during the period of the Vietnam War. She witnessed the terror of war through the Land Reformation Campaign where thousands of terrified villagers were forced to denounce their landlords and later those landlords were killed or sent to labor camps. McPherson (1984) wrote, "her traumatic witness to the horrors of the Maoist-style land reform campaign (1953-56) led by Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary government marked the first stage in her early vocation as a writer." Most social studies on the Vietnam War focused on the battle between Communism and Capitalism, the chemical weapons used by the United States, the violation of human rights by both the American and North Vietnam soldiers, and the destruction of Vietnam socio economic state. Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without A Name* portrayed the Vietnamese society during the period of war, from her own experience during the war. Although the novel was set during the tail end of the war when the fighting was mainly between the North Vietnam and South Vietnam, the experience of trauma can be seen existing even during the American intervention. Hence, this study portrayed the traumatic experiences of the Vietnamese people which were analyzed through the trauma theory. The objective of this study is to explain the factors of trauma that has been portrayed by the author in the characters within the novel.

This study applied the psychological concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (from this point will be known as PTSD) to analyze the traumatic experience faced by the characters within Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without A Name*. For this study, the characteristics of trauma symptoms were used to analyze the existence of trauma in the novel. The characteristics were used by Myra MacPherson in her research to examine the American veterans who suffered from a traumatic experience. The characteristics of symptoms were divided into four factors. Factor I discussed about the depression suffered by the veteran. The conditions discussed under this factor were the effect of depression such as feeling worthless and suicidal feelings. Factor II discussed the residual guilt or grief suffered by the veterans through the action that they have taken during the war. Factor III discussed on the re-experiencing of the experience through nightmares and violence dreams, victims suffered from this condition usually did not experience the trauma fully during the event but experience the trauma through the subconscious mind. Factor IV discussed on the detachment and anger suffered by the veterans, this factor depicted the cause of traumatic effect due to examples such as mistrust of other and feeling distant from friends and family.

Throughout this paper, the characteristic of trauma symptoms will be discussed briefly and the factors of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among the characters in the novel will be analyzed. The limitations of the study as well as the recommendations for future studies will also be discussed.

Characteristic Of Trauma Symptoms

Myra MacPherson in her book entitled *Long time passing: Vietnam & the haunted generation* explained that there were four characteristic of trauma symptoms, the characteristic are as follow: i) depression, ii) residual guilt or grief, iii) re-experiencing the trauma, and iv) emotional detachment and anger. The first characteristic symptom was depression, which was commonly found among the victims of trauma. The victims in this category suffered from a condition in which they had a hard time to co-exist with society, MacPherson explained this characteristic of trauma through her interview with Tom Hagel (a Vietnam veteran and a law professor). He recalled his life after the Vietnam War to be depressed where he stood at a suicidal depression state:

“My modus operandi was to sit by myself in a bar, get drunk, and if anyone said anything to me, I'd just go crazy. I was functioning only in school and then, later, at work. It was my way to escape,” Hagel also remembers constantly thinking of ways to commit suicide to make it look like an accident so that his family could collect insurance benefits (MacPherson 1984: 180).

From the interview, it can be understood that Hagel faced a certain degree of depression that could lead to a suicidal state. He excluded himself from the society by running away from any conversation and getting drunk. He tried to escape from the trauma he had in Vietnam, without proper healing process he would have committed suicide. Victims faced with this symptom usually faced with severe isolation from the society. Being a cast off from the society, they fell into a certain state of depression to the extent of not able to co-exist with society.

The second characteristic of symptom was residual guilt and grief. In this state, the victims usually felt remorse of their past action. The mistake they had done during the war affected their mind to relive the experience. In her interview with a counsellor who worked with a Vietnam veteran, MacPherson describes the survivor guilt and grief experienced by a soldier who accidentally shot and killed his friend as he tried to pull him out of a river during an ambush:

For fourteen years he's been driving forty two miles out of his way around the town to work. He refuses to drive through it. After he comes into therapy, he suddenly remembers. The guy he killed was buried in that town. He felt so guilty that he had totally blocked that from his mind (MacPherson 1984: 207).

The victims who suffered from this type of symptom did not show any noticeable remorse or regret but unconsciously suffered from trauma without noticing it. For example, the victim in the excerpt above did not know the reason why his body reacted by avoiding the town, but his mind unconsciously made him to avoid the town.

The third characteristic symptom was re-experiencing the trauma, most trauma victims suffered from this symptom by re-experiencing the trauma experience through recurrent dreams or nightmares. John Ketwig, a Vietnam veteran described one of his recurring nightmares to MacPherson in one of the interviews:

I dream I am leaning over the bed to kiss a forehead goodnight, and there is a stir, and a beautiful, trusting face has been transformed into the bubbled, flaking, disfigured black horror of the kid I once saw in the hospital (MacPherson 1984: 295).

Ketwig suffered from recurring nightmares of what he saw during the war, from beautifully described unknown face his mind shifted to the horror he experienced. MacPherson explained the victims suffered from this symptom will regularly visit their traumatic experience by having nightmares that projected the image they had seen.

The fourth characteristic symptom was detachment and anger, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders third edition (DSM III) stated that the sporadic and unpredictable explosions of aggression were common behavior of combat veterans with trauma. One veteran described a violent episode he had while looking at his photographs of Vietnam with his wife and neighbor.

Vietnam veterans with trauma can become over controlled aggressors because of their fear of letting out the anger and rage they felt. According to Joseph Gelsomino, "Part of their identity is being seen as someone who can kill and one of their fears comes from the unleashing of that." (qtd. in MacPherson 1984: 275). Another interview held by MacPherson with a veteran's wife and the veteran himself:

My husband will take a seat by the kitchen in a restaurant, ask for a steak rare and get it well done, and never complain. (The husband explanation for this is) I am so afraid to let go because I think I would go completely out of control (MacPherson 1984: 267).

In addition to the trauma related stress that is ever present, the victims must also cope with the normal stresses of everyday life. They may often be living on the verge of exploding with no way of communicating their stress and letting it out in healthy ways. So, they displace this stress and anger toward the people who are closest to them.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is the qualitative method which involves an in depth reading of the novel: *Novel Without A Name*, and the analyzing of the text using the PTSD approach. PTSD was applied to examine the traumatic experience of the characters and how it affects the characters and their life within the novel. This will surely help in building a solid foundation to defend the research topic. The investigation was carried out on the novel by delving into the traumatic experience that was presented by Duong Thu Huong. From comprehensive reading of the novel, data were gathered to analyses the text and articles and journals regarding trauma and the Vietnam War will play a role in explaining the events that prompted her to include the traumatic events in *Novel Without A Name*. Facts from selective past and recent articles were also used to support the standing and conclusion.

The Factors Of Ptsd Among The Characters In The Novel Without A Name

The cause of PTSD in the novel can be seen early in the novel. The novel starts as the main character (Quan) had trouble sleeping after experiencing certain event at the beginning of the novel,

The flame of our oil flickered weakly ... It was impossible to sleep, so I murmured a prayer. Dear sisters, you who have lived and died here as human beings: Do not haunt us any longer ... When victory comes, when peace comes to our country, we will carry you back to the land of your ancestors (Duong 1995: 1-2).

In this excerpt of the novel, Quan is suffering from sleep deprivation. According to the characteristic of trauma symptoms, Quan suffered from Factor II which is 'grief of sorrow.' It was revealed that Quan was feeling remorseful for burying the six corpses,

[t]wo weeks earlier we had buried six girls ... We found six naked corpses. Women. Their breast and genitals had been cut off and strewn on the grass around them (Duong 1995: 2).

Death is normal to a human life and even for Quan who served in a war, he must have seen and buried bodies of his comrades. For Quan, to see the corpses of the girls who were brutally murdered would inevitably spark a sense of trauma within him. Another example of PTSD factor occurred in the early parts of the novel through the portrayal of the character Luy. From Duong's depiction, Luy mistook one of his comrades as an orangutan and accidentally shot him dead,

Luy ran towards me, his face white. "Quan, Quan ..." "I couldn't meet his eyes. I too was trembling. "What's the matter?" "I don't know. The orangutan, it screamed like a man. I'm so scared ... Come with me." He choked and his neck fell limply to one side. I put my hand on his heart. It had stopped beating. I yanked out one of his hairs and held it under his nostrils. It didn't move. Luy let out a wail and began to weep, his head glued to Phien's chest, his huge body racked with sobs. "Oh no, oh no." (Duong 1995: 19-20)

Furthermore, this event can also be related to the category Factor II which is 'guilt of action taken during the war.' Luy's grief was not of the killing of an enemy soldier but because he killed one of his comrades. Luy knew the consequences of killing an ally, a death penalty at the hands of the firing squad. He was ready to face judgement and even begged Quan to shoot him instantly, but out of a whim Quan decided to spare Luy's life because of the memory of the latter's mother. Most of the PTSD victims during the Vietnam War fall into this category. Factor II of the characteristic of trauma symptoms described the residual guilt or grief occurred to the soldiers who experienced traumatic event during their tour in the war. The novel progresses to show the situation and environment during wartime and another factor of PTSD symptoms depicted by Duong in her novel. In this category, Duong depicted trauma in one of her female character, Vieng, whereby Duong tried to convey a message that it was not just the men who suffered from traumatic experience but the women who served their country also suffered from this traumatic experience,

"Comrade Vieng, it's because you're alone here that I want to spare you trouble. If by accident you get ... it would kill you." She let put a little cry and threw herself onto me: "There's no risk. If I got pregnant from you, all the better. Quan, come, Quan." (Duong 1995: 46)

From the excerpt, Vieng is willing to take any risks even if her actions will cause her to lose her life. Vieng's traumatic experience was not caused by the killing of another human but it can be through her job as the undertaker of N22 cemetery. Vieng's cause for PTSD could fall into Factor I which is 'suicidal feeling or attempts', that explains about the depression suffered from soldiers. In Vieng's case, she was suffering from bouts of depression through her job as a caretaker for a cemetery of war. Her job requires her to be around dead people all the time. As a result, she could not live in normal human condition. Her condition has led her to have suicidal tendencies and it was portrayed by Duong in her novel through the line,

"But I want to die. Take me, kill me. Make me die." (Duong 1995: 46)

Another example of Factor I victim was portrayed by Duong through the character of Hoa, the woman who was once the love interest of Quan. The difference between the American soldiers and Vietnamese soldiers during the war was the people drafted into the army. Most of the records showed that the American joined the army to serve their country while the North Vietnamese used the party committee to draft out young male and female to join the cause. Hoa was one of the girls who was drafted by the party committee, the intended female roles in the war was to be as the caretaker for the soldiers in a camp but sometimes they were used as sexual entertainment for their male counterpart.

Taking the fact that Duong wrote her novel from her past experience as a soldier, it was possible that there were large numbers of girls and women who got pregnant when they were drafted,

[p]oor girl. By the end of the year, she was pregnant. No one wanted to claim the child. She refused to denounce the father. Shamed, her parents threw her out (Duong 1995: 139).

After being impregnated by the unnamed father and abandoned by her family, Hoa felt that she was not worthy to live with the rest of the villagers and took refuge at the end of the village all by herself. Hoa's feeling of worthlessness did not end just by her secluding herself but she also rejects any visitor from the village. This was portrayed when she tried to chase out Quan, the person whom she loved before she fell into this traumatic state. Another factor of PTSD symptoms shown through the novel was Factor III which is 'nightmares.' Both examples that fall into this category were portrayed through the main character, Quan. The first example can be seen when Quan visits the encampment of Special Unit M.035. The purpose of Quan's visit to the special unit camp was to check on Bien's condition after he was repositioned from his old post and to Quan's surprise the special unit's duty was to produce coffins for the upcoming battle. From witnessing the number of coffins produced by the special unit, Quan was traumatized by the numbers of death predicted by the higher ranking official. Quan went through a traumatizing dream which initially projected a peaceful setting that turned into a nightmare at the end,

Millions of bees swarm into a translucent emerald sky. I am lulled by the beating of wings ... A field of violets swaying in the splendor of dawn, bent heavy with dew and honey. The bees plunge, trembling into flowers...

I reel in this strange music, careen through a field of violets. Feverish, I pursue the song. I walk, and walk, on and on, without stopping. I float in space, like the earth. I can see myself. I am in rags, white-haired, with a faded beard. I am running now, staggering through field after field. Thunder shatters the horizon. A flash of lighting. Terrified, I look up. The enormous bee's nest melts. From each comb falls a coffin. Millions and millions of coffin pile up on the ground ... (Duong 1995: 182-183).

The excerpts above were describing the nightmare that traumatized Quan and most of the nightmares faced by the veterans in the studies and research described that they relived the experience of their own death or the death of their comrade. In the novel, Duong portrayed the horror of death through Quan's dream. Quan did not experience any traumatizing nightmares such as the image of a comrade coming back to life and then turned into a horrifying ghost but his dream described the horror of death through the image of a peaceful nature that later changed into something horrifying. Although there were more examples portrayed by Duong in the novel, the examples discussed above were more suitable and relevant to the objectives of this study.

Conclusion

The factors of trauma experienced by the characters in the novel were the cause of PTSD and the factors can be divided into four different types of factor. Factor I which am 'depression', discussed about the emotional state of a victim who had the tendencies to commit suicide or the feeling of unworthiness. Through this factor, the character of Vieng and Hoa were analyzed. Vieng suffered from being lonely and as a consequence she had the tendency to commit suicide even though the act of sexual intercourse which is supposed to be something that human enjoys. Her feeling of not being able to socialize or even love has made her suffer even more traumatic experience. Furthermore, being able to survive alone and manage a cemetery had damaged her ability to think logically. In another case, Hoa fell into a state of depression because of her feelings of unworthiness after getting impregnated during her service in the army. Her depression had scarred her even more after she had decided refused to denounce the man and her family exiled her. She had taken refuge at the end of village by living alone in a hut and she even rejected the man who once loved her. This factor explains about how a person can be a victim of PTSD from depression and both of these characters displayed the said trait. The environment played an important role as both characters fell into a state of depression caused by their immediate surroundings: Vieng lived in a secluded place without having another person to socialize with while taking care of a cemetery and Hoa was exiled by her society because she made a mistake where she can be considered as bringing shame to her family. Factor I is deeply concerned with the surroundings as the cause of PTSD among the victims.

Factor II discussed about the residual guilt or grief suffered by the soldiers as a direct consequence to the actions that they had taken during the war. The characterization of Quan and Luy was analyzed through the action they took during the war. Quan

suffered from a residual grief after he had buried six gruesome corpses early in the novel. This is because the state of the corpses was so terrible that it left Quan with a traumatic experience. The feeling of grief Quan experienced had made him relive the trauma again in one of his dreams. Another character who suffered from this factor was Luy as he had the residual guilt of killing his own friend. Luy's habit of going on a hunt in the middle of night was what caused him the mistake of shooting his own friend. The guilt of killing his own friend took a heavy toll on Luy which later affected him. Mainly, Factor II depicted the victims who suffered from the residual guilt or grief that was caused by their own actions during the war. As portrayed by Quan and Luy, even though both of the characters suffered from a traumatic experience caused by their own actions but they differ in circumstance. In Quan's case, the trauma was experienced from witnessing a gruesome death which cannot be comprehended by the logics of a human mind. Meanwhile, Luy suffered the residual guilt because he cannot accept the fate that he shot and killed his own friend. The actions taken by both of the characters had led them to experience trauma which fulfilled the conditions set by this factor.

Factor III discussed the re-experiencing of the trauma by the victims whereby this factor was portrayed by Quan because Duong had projected nightmares only through the main character. The traumatic experience faced by Quan was re-experienced through the nightmare he had. Although Quan had experienced several trauma incidents in the novel, but the feeling he had after visiting the special unit camp had made him even more traumatized after seeing the number of coffins produced. After hearing that the special unit had produced thousands of coffins per order, it made him wonder of how many casualties of war that both sides will incur. The thought of suffering large numbers of casualties had made Quan experience the trauma all over again in his dream. This factor basically discussed about the re-experience of the trauma through nightmares due to the shock the victim experienced through the projection of images over and over again in their mind. Usually the victims suffered because the traumatic image that they witnessed cannot be erased in their subconscious and thus was projected again in their dream.

As mentioned before, Duong Thu Huong is a well-known writer both in South East Asia and the rest of the world. As an author who wrote for the freedom of the Vietnamese people, there were a lot of articles written about her struggle against communism in Vietnam but there were no articles and journals written related to the traumatic experience in her novel. This study had to use related articles and journals on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder concerning to the Vietnam War and relate it to the novel. In addition to that, researches done in the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder canon are highly encouraged to have direct contact with the patient. As this novel is a fictional work and is set almost forty years back, this condition is impossible to fulfil. Hence, the study is forced to make an assumption that the portrayal of the characters' traumatic experiences are of Duong's own as the novel is considered to be an autobiographical in nature. Time constraint is also another factor to the study's limitation as this study needs to be restricted to only one novel. Due to this setback, the intended research may not be comprehensive but for future reference it can provide useful information about the subject matter. As stated before, there are many resources and materials available for one novel, the selection of materials need to be controlled and limited so that it will be relevant to the basis of the study.

Recommendations

For those who want to further the topic of this study, I would suggest the other two books written by Duong Thu Huong that can be considered as sequels to this novel. The two books are *Memories of a Pure Spring* and *No Man's Land* which can be explored through the same lenses as this study did or develop new concepts altogether. Furthermore, there are a number of novels that I did not get the chance to explore in this study due to the time constraint and the different concepts portrayed by other authors. There are a number of PTSD concepts besides war as identity and political issues can be considered as part of the PTSD concept. The concept of PTSD should also be researched by future studies as the concept is broad and not to be restricted into just one narrow concept. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz is a good text that can be studied in the future as the novel portrayed the identity and political trauma faced by the South American immigrants who lived in the United States. In addition to that, the *Novel Without A Name* by Duong Thu Huong can also be analyzed through the concept of political trauma as the author herself is a refugee from the ideology that governed the country.

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