



DISASTER AND TRAUMA OF THE UNHEARD: AN ECOCRITICAL PROBE INTO THAKAZHI SIVASANKARAPILLAI'S IN THE FLOOD

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Abstract

The contemporary trauma studies in literature today digs into the individual and collective social response towards a disaster paired with post- structural, postcolonial and socio- cultural theories. The word trauma carries a more liberal sense today encompassing not just a terrible event, but also any kind of overwhelming and distressing experience. Trends in trauma and disaster studies are mostly connected with the effects on the human society and tend to ignore the other living beings. Disaster and trauma is experienced by all the living beings alike, include the humans, but the humans prove to be more privileged than the rest. This paper studies Thakazhi Sivasankarapillai's Vellappokkathil, (translated as In the Flood by P. P. Raveendran) from the perspective of a disaster- affected animal by analysing his trauma instead of that of the individual. In the scenario of that great flood which shakes the normality of the entire population residing in the village, the humans are seen to be rescued in the boats. The dog is left ignored, isolated and panicked in the flood so that the dog's expressions, gestures, sounds etc. become manifestations of the traumatic experience. The dog is a perfect representation of a traumatic disaster victim which is marginalized by being unseen, unrescued and ignored by the family to which he stays loyal unto the last. The finding is that even in a disaster the barriers between the privileged and unprivileged rise up. Though not about class or caste, the species and language become factors of discrimination where the severity of trauma is represented in voices of the unheard dog rather than what is seen in the rescued humans.

Keywords: disaster, trauma, alienation, flood, ecocriticism, marginalization, In the Flood, Thakazhi Sivasankarapillai

Introduction

‘How strange it must all have seemed to them, here where they lived so safely always! They thought such a dreadful thing could happen to others, but not to them. That is the way!’, William Dean Howells writes so about an earthquake in his book, *A Sleep and a Forgetting*. Disasters have been on a substantial rise globally during the last three decades. Today disaster is quite common so that every living human in the world happens to be a seer or a survivor of some kind of disaster. The loss of life and homes has been increasing due to every natural or man-made disaster in various parts of the world. This made disaster studies a necessity in the contemporary world and it joined hands with the different branches across science and humanities for better disaster management and risk reduction. Disaster in literature focuses on the recount of such experiences, narratives of the trauma faced, repercussions of such memories, lament for the lost ones, nostalgia for the lost home and so on. Disaster in literature probes into the human minds of the seer or survivor and makes every individual experience applied to the collective consciousness. The investigations on the affected individuals in disaster studies gave way to the studies on the trauma and its survival. Every disaster thus becomes a story of a traumatic mind, a social being and the entire human society.

Disaster and trauma studies however tend to be slightly negligent towards the affected living beings other than the humans. While all the branches invest their complete energy towards dissecting the effects into psychological, social, economic, statistic, commercial and scientific and while it is even again subdivided, the disaster studies turn a blind eye towards the suffering and trauma of other living beings who are more affected than humans, but are sympathetically marginalised. In that space which is rather a residue left over after the concerns of various studies are carried off, comes the dog portrayed in *In the Flood* written by the eminent writer, Thakazhi Sivasankarapillai and translated to English by P. P. Raveendran. The story reverberates the trauma of the dog due to two major disasters it has to face- one which is the great flood itself and the second is the pathetic negligence and forgetfulness that the family shows to it in leaving it behind and alone. The dog dies not because of the former reason, but because of the latter.

In Danielle Bernock’s book, *Emerging with Wings: a True Story of Lies, Pain and the Love that Heals*, he writes ‘trauma is personal. It does not disappear if it is not validated. When it is ignored or invalidated, the silent screams continue internally heard only by the one held captive. When someone enters the pain and hears the screams, healing can begin.’ The validation of the trauma of the human and the consequent rescue in the boat in contrast to the extreme negligence and lack of concern shown towards the dog, and the invalidation of the trauma of the dog form the crux of the story.

Trauma studies in literature today is clubbed with post-structural, postcolonial and sociocultural theories to form various layers of representations of an extreme experience and its effects on identity, memory and the psyche. Extending the sense of the term from the three categories aforementioned, the well-known psychological trauma theorist, Peter Levine characterizes trauma not by the event but by one’s reactions to it and the symptoms. He identifies that “any overwhelming and distressing experience” can be called trauma. In *In the Flood*, Thakazhi extends the view to a more liberal strata without any kind of discrimination based on caste, status, class, region or even species. The common characteristics of trauma as defined by the American Psychological Association include intense and sometimes unpredictable feelings, irritability, mood swings, anxiety, depression, confusion or difficulty in making decisions, a change in interpersonal relationships skills, such as an increase in conflict or a more withdrawn and avoidant personality. All these are measured in terms of language and expression which make it confined to the human species alone. The frustration of inexpressibility of an animal is never considered.

Alienation, Resistance and Trauma of the Dog in *In the Flood*

In the Flood is based on a real flood which shook the entire Kerala in 1924. The flood is popularly addressed to as the great flood of ’99, owing to its occurrence in the Malayalam era 1099 when rivers Periyar, Meenachil, Pampa, Muvattupuzha and others originating from Sahyadri mountains and hills flooded in Kerala. The rain having continued for about three weeks submerged many districts in Kerala from Trichur to Ernakulam, from Idukki to Kottayam and even up to Alappuzha including the Kuttanad region. The flood is still a fearful memory for the old generation living today who were kids then and the memory was narrated when a similar flood occurred in Kerala last year. The church records in most ancient churches were also damaged which resulted in the present church records of the ancient churches starting only from 1924 AD.

Most of the records and poetry about the flood tend to ignore the severity of suffering of the animals and the birds. Thakazhi takes up a stand that throws light on disaster from the perspective of dog which is seen to run, scream and await its life- rescuing boat, but there arrives none. In the first part of the story, when Chenna was getting rescued, we see the dog sniffing around without being aware of the rescue. No one was there to look for him and no one was there to enquire. When the dog comes back to the rooftop and sees that the catamaran carrying Chenna has gone at some distance away from the home, “he started moaning in great pain, making sounds that resembled the cry of a hapless human being.” The disaster for the dog actually lies in that moment of getting ignored by the same family whom he guarded till then. Even in the neglected condition, the dog continues to guard its house and threatens the thieves who later arrive in a boat for the coconuts.

Once the dog gets completely alone on the rooftop, we see traces of trauma building up in its behaviour:

That hunger- tormented animal wailed from the rooftop peering out into the dark and cloudy sky. His plaintive cry reached places far off. The sympathetic wind god took it to distant lands. And those few on guard of the houses, the soft- hearted among them, must have said, hear this dog moaning from the roof...

...The dog cried aloud continually for a long time. Then the cry became softer and softer before it stopped. From some house in the north, the man on guard was chanting Ramayana. For sometime the dog turned westward, as though listening to the chant. And then, after a while, he started groaning again and making loud throat rending noises...

... Early morning. The dog started groaning in low tones. He was elaborating the notes of a raga fit to melt the hearts of the listeners.

Disaster and trauma rise to a peak in the behaviour and the human-like cries of the dog. While the human cries are heard, answered, solved and consoled, the animal remains marginalised or subalterned without even knowing how to make itself heard to the rescuing lot. In that sense, disaster studies speak actually about dividing the affected group into a privileged class called humans and an unprivileged class called animals. Studies on trauma relates to the psychoanalytic theories to analyse emotional suffering in texts as well as the language of loss, disruption and fragmentation without much acknowledgement that the animals are also equally or more affected than humans by a disaster. Theories of trauma's effects on the individual psyche are employed to explore the individual experience of a collective traumatic event in a text, thus creating a link between the experience of individuals and cultural groups or between personal and political worlds. Fragmentation or dissociation is viewed as the direct cause of trauma, a view that helps formulate the notion of transhistorical trauma, which suggests that trauma's essential or universal effects on consciousness and narrative recall afford the opportunity to connect individual and collective traumatic experiences. The traumatic analysis is based on the victim's language and it is the language that is used to measure the extremity of the disaster effect on the humans. But sadly, language belongs to the privileged to be analysed. Thus Thakazhi, through his *In the Flood*, has effectively voiced the marginalised and invalidated trauma of a hapless, being without the privilege of a language. The disaster is complete for the dog in the last part of the story:

Now the flood water is receding. Chenna comes back, swimming to his hut in search of his dog. He found the body of the dead dog under a coconut tree, being gently moved by ripples. Chenna turned it from side to side with his toe and examined it. He wondered if that was his own dog after all. It had one of its ears missing and the body was all rotten and discoloured. (77)

After waiting for a day and a night, the resistance of the dog ends. The lifeless body of the dog was handled by the hungry beings. After the flood water decreased, Chenna came to the home to look for the dog whom he conveniently forgot at the time of rescue. Seeing the mutilated body of the dog near his own coconut tree, he seems to be not even sure that it is the same dog that guarded his house till then! The rotten body and discoloured skin of the dog become representations of the severe negligence it faced at times when it needed a hand. How much the dog would have expected its master to turn back, to look back with eyes of love and concern, to lend the same rescue that he himself got or atleast to pause and come back once he finds that the dog is missing! It is so inhuman of the human master to not even look for his dog in the boat or not return when he sees that the dog is all alone in the rooftop when the flood was rising. Every heart which carries humanity melts at the cry of the dog. But it remains unheard to the master whom the dog was loyal to all his life.

In the afternoon two men came that way in a small boat. The dog was grateful and barked and wagged his tail. He spoke to them in a language close to human speech. He stepped into the water, all set to jump onto the boat. “see, here is a dog”, said one of the men. The dog moaned in gratitude, as though he could see the man’s sympathy. “Let it be there”, said the other. The dog opened its mouth, as if he was chewing something. And made some inarticulate sounds. He prayed hard and tried to jump into the boat. (75- 76)

We see the dog fighting tooth and nail to escape from the flood. But we seem him rejected repeatedly by the humans. Every rejection by the human increases the intensity of the trauma in the animal. But the voice remains unheard since as time passed by, there was no one left in the flood. The dog was all alone amidst the flood and the torrential rain.

“God!”

That cry came not from the boatman. It was from the dog.
“God!”

That weak and anguished cry dissolved itself into the wind. There was nothing to be heard after that except the interminable sound of the waves. No one turned back thereafter. Only the dog stayed, peering at the boat till it disappeared from the sight. He climbed on the rooftop once again, growling, as if bidding farewell to the world outside. Perhaps he was trying to say that never again would he love the humankind! He lapped up the flood water. And then he looked at the birds flying above. He saw a water snake frolicking in the waves move towards him. The dog swiftly jumped on to the rooftop. The snake sneaked in through the crack in the roof left open by Chenna and family. The dog peeped inside through the crack and started barking gravely. It communicated itself to the speaker of any language, even, maybe, to a resident of Mars. A universal language. (76)

The human and the non-human constructions in the earth, its barriers and boundaries do not fade away with disasters. Instead they become more clear by a precise marginalisation of the non- human species, pushing to a dark and unidentified spectrum. While the privilege of language blesses a human to be heard, the lack of that privilege dooms the non- human species to a complete disaster. The existence of trauma in an animal is rather unidentified and unexpressed in most disaster literatures which excitedly seem to encompass even the minute variations of the human experiences. Thakazhi, through *In the Flood* break the notion of human’s possession of humanity and mocks it by portraying the dog as more human and more loyal to his people than the humans. Perhaps for this same reason, Thakazhi seems to present the dog not with the pronoun ‘it’, but with the pronoun ‘he’ assuming a more humanised form for it. Going further, he gives the dog a voice more like a human. By portraying the dog so in his story, Thakazhi seems to prove that there is no discrimination for disaster and trauma affect everyone and everything without any kind of discrimination, even into the human and the non- human. It is only the humans who divide the living beings into ‘us’ who are important enough to be rescued and the ‘others’ who can be conveniently ignored. As Laurell K. Hamilton says in *Mistral’s Kiss*, “there are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleed”, the pain, distress and trauma of the animal is much deeper and hurtful than a human who can express them all.

Conclusion

It is commonly argued that disaster breaks down all the barriers and fences, all kinds of discriminations, pride and egoism. But this story presents a scenario of a human and a dog with the convenient marginalisation shown towards the non- human species. Language becomes the tool for discrimination and a sceptre of privilege. While the variations of the dog’s voice are depicted in the story in a sympathetic tone, they are unheard resulting in the dog’s death. The dog is a victim of disaster, trauma and alienation. The disaster here, with the full sense of the term, is not merely the flood depicted, but the negligence from the master that the dog undergoes. The dog shows resistance for survival and fails. In the end, when the master fails to identify the dog, the disaster is complete. The dog dies a miserable death not because of the natural disaster, but because of the alienation it had to experience.

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