



Reflection of Trauma in Poetic Works of Miroslav Holub Before the Prague Spring

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, literature has exercised a great and unavoidable influence in the life of human beings. Employing empowered language, it deals not only with subjective or external realities but also with internal interactions of man with nature and its socio-political scenarios. The objective vision of the life is best revealed in the shape of remembrance, retrospection, introspection, presage, flashback and awful experience and in this regards, poetry serves as a better platform in exploring those spaces in human psyche which is tinged with pain, suffering, mental anguish, would and trauma. This paper sets out to throw light on how Miroslav Holub's poetry, written before the historical Prague Spring (1968), is charged with his anxiety, terror, societal disturbance, ethical lacuna, political unrest and traumatic vision. Though at that time, Holub's distinction as a scientist and a poet is not globally recognized or established, the present paper attempts to highlight how his drawing of social, political, and moral milieu of the-then Czechoslovakia through poetic mode, is the outcome of his traumatized self-knowledge and self-understanding. In his anthologies brought out before the famous Prague Spring including '*Day Duty*' (1958), '*Achilles and The Tortoise*' (1960), '*Primer*' (1961), '*Go and Open the Door*' (1962), '*The So-Called Heart*' (1963), '*Totally Unsystematic Zoology*' (1963), and '*Where the Blood Flows*' (1963), he presents his traumatized poetic vision. His understanding of the world around him is portrayed with necessary and precise bitter irony, knife-like witticism, mentalization, historical association, scientific disciplines, self-infliction, and mental enactments. His dealing with confused alliance between men and communism, relationship between man and nature, difficult and drastic life in terror-struck political background, claustrophobic atmosphere, shattering of peace in life, different causes of distressing in mind--- brings out emotional and psychological trauma which Holub has experienced in life mainly before the great Prague Spring. This paper would hold up the notion, above all, that Holub's traumatized vision helps in enhancing his poetic creativity to its own unique way and gaining him a reputed place in English-speaking world.

Keywords: Trauma, Holub, Vision, Self-knowledge and Self-suffering.

Article

Miroslav Holub is an important scientist-poet of the twentieth century. He was born in Pilsen, Western Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, on September 23, 1923. After the Second World War, he was sent to study medicine at Charles University in Prague. He worked there in a psychiatric ward. About this time, he started writing poems. In 1953, he earned his MD degree. He was appointed as an immunologist at the Microbiological Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science. In 1958, he received a PhD.

His first book of poems *'Day Duty'* was published in 1958. From the very beginning of his poetic career, contemporary concern pervades in his work. The social, political, ethical and psychological milieu exercises a decisive influence on his poetic fields. From his very first collection, he shows his extraordinary bent of mind in studying socio-political circumstances. His scientific, rational, unsentimental, realistic and probing attitudes towards the events are shown in direct manner. His traumatized vision about the rigorous current affairs is portrayed in his unrhymed verse. In the introduction to the *'Selected Poems'* (1967), the English poet and critic A. Alvarez points out that 'source of Holub's strength is his subtle, critical acceptance of the realities as they are, his refusal either to shut things out or to praise them simply because, like Everest, they are there. His poetry is based finally on an unsentimental, probing, compassionate, witty sense of the modern world.'

No doubt, his inner psyche and trauma make an mutual and intimate alliance to strengthen his poetic exploration. The connection is poignant. The word 'trauma' varies in meanings. Generally, the meaning of the term trauma has been derived from a 'stress or blow' which may generate disordered feelings or behaviour to a 'state or condition produced by such a stress or blow' as opined by Erik Erikson, a German-American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst. In other words, it alludes to the situation of minds which arises out of an 'emotional stress or physical injury', according to Merriam-Webster. Thus injury may be physical or psychological. Whatever it may be, it causes a demolishing and damaging effects on experience.

Textual anxieties and acute attention set up his poetic frame where he reveals his traumatized perspectives concerning the unavoidable interaction and affinity with social and political factors. His painful and personal first-hand experience gets published in poetic form which is pregnant with traumatized vision, and in turn his traumatic view gets polished by his true poetic faculty. In the poem *'Graves of prisoners'*, he portrays the pathetic fate of the prisoners of 'nineteen forty-two' when Czechoslovakia was strictly under the control of Nazi Germany from 1938 to 1945. In 1942, the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich was led by a group of British-trained Czech and Slovak commandos. Consequently, it led to reprisals, including the total destruction of the village of Lidice, on June 10, 1942 on orders from Adolf Hitler and Heinrich Himmler, is drawn in 'deathbed-like' traumatic vision. Holub envisions 'Deserted frontier', 'abandoned house', 'black lilac', 'those wolfish rains', 'ruined wall', 'unhealed clay', etc. These fragmented and awe-inspiring imageries speak of his tormented feelings to such extent that even 'on the graves no grass will grow'. The future progress is denied. The profound stress of the historical massacre is reflected in the following lines where he painfully pens down thus:

'Prisoners. In nineteen forty-two
 And still on the graves no grass will grow ,
 as if thin smoke hung over them ,
 as if their bodies rose up from below .

(' Graves of prisoners ' , Lines : 18--21.)

In another poem named '*In the microscope*' , Holub again starts his poem with ' Here too ' indicating the difficult socio- political state of Czechoslovakia in 1950s where Stalinists accused their rivals as conspirators against the people's democratic order and considering this as high betrayal , the opponents were outcast from their positions of power . In all , the Communist Party sentenced some of the leaders to death , including Milanda Horakova , Jan Buchal . To illustrate this political background, he employs scientific method. His traumatic vision is portrayed through microscopic observation. The poem begins with a striking image of estrangement. A world like our own suddenly becomes defamiliarised. The evocation of ' dreaming landscapes ' is followed by Marxist- inspired image in which the biological organisms , the representative of the ideal political leaders , take on the role of ' fighters ' . Here , cells like their human counterparts die heroically for an ideal , a song --- a song for equality , fraternity and freedom . He writes:

' Here too are dreaming landscapes,
 lunar, derelict .
 Here too are the masses,
 tillers of the soil .
 And cells , fighters
 who lay down their lives
 for a song . '

(' In the microscope ' , Lines : 1--7.)

Here , his referring to the ' tillers of the soil ' and the sense of protesting ' cells ' highlights the claim of the citizens with rights- gathering to rebel . So , he hears ' the revolt of immense estates ' . What initially appears to be a calm world or uninhabited dream- like cool state laid out on a glass slide under a microscope for observation has turned out to be a world with rebellious life . Some of them have sacrificed their lives for the sake of harmony , humanity and coming generations .

In another poem named '*Pathology*' , his traumatized vision of the reality is expressed in a tranquil mood . Here , he takes on the role of a moral pathologist in diagnosing the social decay and in the process , he exhibits his disturbing experience where a static stance reigns . Its history of interwar period when Czechoslovakia was the most prosperous and politically peaceful state , now becomes ' Dumb ' where ' Only the dust moans ' . The decay and terror- stricken environment equates ' Heaven , Hell , and Paradise ' where the scenarios like ' Equality dumb . Fraternity dumb. ' pervade . In utterly calmness , he resigns to his disturbing realization in the following lines :

'Behold, Christians,
 Heaven, Hell, and Paradise
 in bottles .
 And no wailing,
 not even a sigh .
 Only the dust moans.
 Dumb is history
 strained
 through capillaries .

Equality dumb. Fraternity dumb. '
 (' Pathology' , Lines : 12--21.)

Through his pathological psyche , he carries on socio- political dissection only to discover trauma- causing phenomenon . His unique microscopic observation leads him to the core of the events to make him feel how helpless he is in such dangerous world . In the poem '*Casualty*' , his overwhelmed feeling for the victims of political riot is pictured with 'crushed fingers', 'burnt- out eyes', 'madness of blood', 'the scream of flesh' and so on . The repetition of the phrase 'mend it , doctor' echoes the shattering of a sense of security in such perilous and panic- stricken world . During 'suturing' , doctor- poet regards him impotent enough to cease all these 'thunderous bombs' to be mortally exploded and idiocy of the victims who are put to death in the name of 'glorious victories' . Holub's emotional trauma is visible in the following lines thus :

'They bring us crushed fingers ,
 mend it , doctor .
 They bring burnt- out eyes ,
 hounded owls of hearts ,
 they bring a hundred white bodies ,
 a hundred red bodies ,
 mend it , doctor ,
 on the dishes of ambulances they bring
 the madness of blood
 the scream of flesh ,
 the slice of charring ,
 mend it , doctor . '
 ('Casualty' , Lines : 1--12 .)

Not only the future progress of the society is denied under communism, but also the commoners are destined to live under a terror-struck environment. They feel insecure every moment. An inexplicable panic and claustrophobic atmosphere circles them day and night. They are just passing 'the rotation of the earth'. This trauma-awakening situation is distinct in the poem named - '*Night in the streets*', in the anthology titled- '*Achilles & The Tortoise*' (1960) in the following:

'It's enough that we are alive.
 Are breathing.
 Responsible
 even for the rotation of the earth.'
 ('Night in the streets', Lines : 20 -- 23.)

In another poem named '*Five minutes after the air raid*', Holub speaks of an unspeakable panic looming large the Czechoslovakia when the Soviet Union and their members try to curb reformers and cause spreading menace, sabotage, dismay, and defiance of curfews. The cataclysm finds its expression in the traumatized vision of the poet in the concluding lines thus:

'In the morning they found her
 still as stone,
 sparrows pecking her hands.'
 ('Five minutes after the air raid', Lines : 24 --26.)

In the poem named '*The sick primer*', from the collection entitled- '*Primer*' (1961), he records 'the worst contagious disease', 'paper fevers', 'black- and- white hallucinations', and 'superstitions spots' as the cause of his trauma. His traumatized vision achieves its highest peak in his lines where he speaks of his poems to be 'made not of words / but of drops' owing to reign of 'the monstrous angels of darkness'. He writes:

'An unspeakable time,
 when the voice of loudspeakers cracks
 and poems
 are made not of words
 but of drops.'
 ('The rain at night', Lines : 14-- 18.)

In the poem named '*The door*' from his next anthology entitled- '*Go and Open the Door*' (1962), he seeks to relieve from such stressful situations. His poetic introspection urges him to:

'Go and open the door.
Even if there's only
the darkness tickling,
even if there's only
the hollow wind,
even if
nothing
is there,
go and open the door.'

('The door', Lines : 15--23 .)

In the poem named '*Fog*' from his anthology titled- '*The So- Called Heart*' (1963), Holub speaks to his alter ego in vain to make out each other as a blood-ridden 'enormous body of reality' lies in between them. The poet's deeply disappointing vision is quite visible in the following:

'You have something to say, but
I do not understand you:
between us stretches
the enormous body of reality
and from its severed head
bubble the clots
of white blood.'

('Fog', Lines: 13 -- 19.)

For Holub, his familiar world gradually becomes unknown. Faith in human life has been devoured by skepticism. Hope that sustains life and assists in putting up with all circumstances is roughly destroyed by utter frustration and melancholy. Gloom prevails over everyone. Panic reigns in the country. An impending doom highly looms large over the world. In the poem named '*The end of the world*' of his collection entitled- '*Totally Unsystematic Zoology*' (1963), Holub's retrospective view is highlighted concerning the termination of the world and draws what remains left after the ongoing process of entire demolition. The images like 'the bird had come to the very end of its song', and 'the tree was dissolving under its claws' in an unusual way, focus on the unexpected vision of the poet where 'a message still / crackled:' in vain. His traumatized and retrospective view gets its appalling expression in the following lines where he takes down thus:

Only in the telegraph wires

a message still

crackled :

C... ..o... ..m... ..e . h... o... ..m... ..e .

y... ..o... ..u... .. h... a... ..v... ..e .

a... ..s... ..o... ..n... ..'

(‘The end of the world ‘, lines: 6-11.)

Thus, plea for coming back home goes awry. No hope is left both for killed and rest of the living . In the poem ‘Reality’ from ‘Where The Blood Flows’ (1963), he feels the ‘worms of pain ‘. Though he ‘wanted to ask ‘ about all anarchy , all stressful events around , his right has been thwarted or even politically suppressed . He only puts his words in vain in following:

‘Though we wanted to ask
Where the blood was flowing
And
Whether you were still dead,
darling. ‘

(‘Reality’, Lines: 12-16.)

Thus , before the 1968 reform movement in Czechoslovakia which is historically known as Prague Spring , Holub in his poetic works reflects all his disturbing experience , shattering realization , helpless condition and the drastic socio- political reality of the -then Czechoslovakia which . play a vital role in forming his traumatic vision , as ‘Unlike other forms of psychological disorders , the core issue in trauma is reality : “ It is indeed the truth of the traumatic experience that forms the centre of its psychopathology ; it is not a pathology of falsehood or displacement of meaning , but of history itself ” (Caruth , 1995 , p.5) . However , the critical element that makes an event traumatic is the subjective assessment by victims of how threatened and helpless they feel .’, according to the opinion of Bessel A. van der Kolk . And Holub deals with his traumatized sensibility in a unique way which leads to self-knowledge and self-understanding both for the poet and the readers .

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