



# A Study of Trauma- Cause, Effect and Recuperation in David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors*

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Abstract:

*This article is an attempt to analyze the cause and effects of trauma and the victim's recuperation from trauma through a study of David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors*. The various incidents in the novel are realistic examples of trauma. This article isolates the various traumatic events in the novel that lead to trauma and examines the effect of trauma on the individual and the possible modes of recuperation by analyzing the struggles of the narrator through an application of trauma theory. The entire novel is a meta-narrative of the narrator's attempt to recuperate from various traumatic events.*

Key words: trauma, recuperation, meta-narrative, postcolonial novel

This research is an attempt to analyze the cause and effects of trauma and the victim's recuperation from trauma through a study of David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors*. The various incidents in the novel are realistic examples of trauma. The political aspect is predominantly visible in the narrative of *The Solitude of Emperors* in its argument against sectarian violence and in its pro-secularist stance. The novel has for its background the Mumbai riots of December 1992, and a parallel but minor scuffle between sectarian and

secular forces in a remote hill station in the Nilgiris named Meham. Besides, the narrator Vijay undergoes trauma heavily impacted by the two political incidents. This article focuses on the cause and effect of trauma on the individual and the possible mode of recuperation by analyzing the struggles of the narrator through an application of trauma theory.

Trauma theory came into being only after the mid-1990s. The transition from acknowledgment of purely physical pain to the psychical wound was first seen in *Popular Science Monthly* in 1895. The terms ‘traumatic neurosis’ and ‘nervous shock’ were coined in the 1860s. In the 1870s and 1880s Ian Hacking recorded ‘diseases of memory’ including hysteria, double/multiple personality, hypnotic and other trance states and amnesia. In the nineteenth-century, mental sickness was a sign of physical weakness and degeneration. Freud and Breuer’s publication of “On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena” in 1893 challenged the idea of hysteria being a result of physical degeneration.

Later the Yale School Trauma theory came into being. The Yale School was a group of critics who worked to disseminate the ideas of Jacques Derrida in literary studies in North America. It was Paul de Man who fostered the ideas of Derrida in the American academy. The Yale school was fascinated with paradox and contradiction. Paul de Man highlighted the work of literary interpretation in the gap between reference and interpretation. Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* transposed this gap between reference and interpretation to the structure of trauma (Waugh 502). The critic further writes that to Geoffrey Hartman, figurative language is a form of perpetual troping around a primary experience that can never be captured and that trauma is a key expository device. Further Waugh reiterates the views on trauma theory and acknowledges that Hartman had pointed out :Trauma had then become the motivating “nature of the negative that provokes symbolic language” (502). Shoshana Felman equipped the translation of deconstruction into trauma theory.

A wide range of concerns can be conceptualized under the category of trauma. Waugh lists them to include “psychic life to public history, reading materials that can include Romantic poetry, psychiatric case histories, accounts of sexual abuse, memoirs, testimonies, documentaries, and the symptomatic silences and omissions in national histories” (503). Trauma theory emerged as a part of a wider realignment of cultural

and literary theory in the early 1990s. Michael Balaev has presented that fiction portrays numerous and varied responses to trauma (Penner). The critic identifies speech as the solution to traumatic pathology, and the absence of speech indicates trauma.

Within the first few chapters of the novel, the narrator Vijay lands himself in the middle of the Mumbai riots of December 1992. Sectarian violence is unleashed on the suburbs of Mumbai, and scarcely aware of the danger that he might have to face, he stumbles upon the beheading of a Muslim. His first hand witnessing of the gruesome murder is the central event of the traumatic experience that he undergoes. Following the murder, the thugs inflict physical injury upon Vijay also and he is left unconscious on the streets. After this, his friend who had fled the scene returns to rescue him and he is hospitalized.

There is an irony of situation as Vijay had himself been on the lookout for a scene of violence. Being a journalist, he had been looking for firsthand experience of violence during the riots. He writes: "Or perhaps the thought had surfaced, no matter how foolhardy it may seem in retrospect, that here was my story, the one that I had come on to the streets to look for" (52). But the reality of the scene, with the head of the beheaded victim falling off, and intestines spilling out, is too much for him and he himself freezes and is unable to run away from the scene of violence.

The second traumatic event occurs at the climax of the novel. Mr. Sorabjee sends Vijay to Meham, a tiny hill station in Nilgiris, as Vijay was much in need of a change of place, in order to recuperate from the impact of the first traumatic event in Mumbai. Noah had led a secluded life until Vijay pressurized him into defending the shrine in Meham along with him. In the scuffle on the top of the hill, Noah falls to his death. Vijay feels responsible for the death of Noah as it was he who had made him participate in defending the shrine. This second incident of trauma hits Vijay and he is unable to forgive himself. He is defeated enough and demoralized to quit his job as journalist and moves to Canada where he lives in relative isolation writing his book.

The traumatic events have varied and lasting effects on the narrator. After the first traumatic event, Vijay had to recuperate in the hospital. Apart from physical injury, he had a high fever due to the shock of the incident. He also had other symptoms of trauma – memory loss, insomnia, stomach aches and depression.

Trauma survivors attempt to suppress the impact of trauma through dissociation. The narrator dissociates himself from the reality of the incident by making himself a passive spectator. He mutely watches as the person is beheaded near him. A critic writes about this attempt to escape from the reality of the situation through dissociation as : “To survive these experiences, perhaps we dissociate. This can take various forms. In the extreme form, we remove ourselves, psychically speaking, from the situation (because we are unable to do so physically), perhaps by adopting the role of a witness to, instead of the object of, the cruelty” (Tanney 351). The protagonist is unable to run away from the murder and ends up being a spectator, with the terrible fear that he might suffer the same fate in the next few minutes. After the initial impact of the incident, he descends into a sordid pallor, a stupor that he does not want to awake from. The narrator admits that he “retreated into a personal darkness, away from a world I couldn’t handle” (55).

When he was discharged from the hospital Mr.Sorabjee insisted on sending him back to his parents, Vijay refused. Hence it was arranged for him to have counseling, and he was relegated to his house for nearly two months. With the help of his therapist and antidepressants, he was able to come out of his depression.

Another behaviour of trauma survivors is the tabulation/encapsulation of the traumatic experience. After initial therapy, the narrator entered into the second phase of the post-traumatic recuperation where he became obsessed with reading everything he could about the riots, and watched television programs about it. He was desperate to get involved in some way or the other in the various activities like peace marches and fund-raisers towards rebuilding the city of Mumbai. These were his vague attempts to heal from the first traumatic event, by breaking it into its component parts and trying to pinpoint what he should have done and what he should not have by continuously reflecting on it and analyzing it.

The narrator suffered from repetitive nightmares for several weeks which he describes thus: “ In the nightmares I was prone to afterwards, I would see the head flying off and the gush of blood, but on the day I saw none of this, only something more obscene than anything else I would witness that night – the neck abruptly collapsing on itself like a flaccid rubber tube” (52). In his repetitive dream, he would be walking down a lonely street in Bombay. The street lamps were surmounted with human heads and the columns would topple on him with blood while he walked past them. At the end of the street was a crouching figure. As he passed the man stood up and revealed his eyelids being orbs of blood. He would lift his hand that carried a sword and appear to strike him, when the narrator awoke (56). It was a couple of months before he recuperated with therapy and the nightmares gradually faded.

The people around him were also impacted by this traumatic event. Mr. Sorabjee is the editor of the magazine that Vijay worked for. He meets the members of the editorial meeting after the riots and addresses the importance of their work in voicing the need for a pluralistic society. He explains the impact of the bomb blasts and the thoughts that overcome him after it:

But after the bomb blasts, I wondered whether anything we do is going to make a difference – there are forces massing to destroy the plural masterpiece that this country has always been, and those of us who think this is deplorable don't seem to be doing any good at all. I have told all of you that we can never allow our voice to be silenced but is there anyone around to hear us cry out? This is what I have been wrestling with for the past few days. This morning, when I woke up, I finally had my answer: if there is even one person left in the country to whom our message will make a difference, that person is the reason we will keep going. Let us not forget that, my friends. (59)

He advises his staff that they should continue their work of conveying the need for secularism and tolerance even if their message reached only one person. Idealism and moralizing are the only things that keep the editor and his staff committed to the task of recording and revealing the truth.

The narrator attempted to recuperate the pain of trauma by channelizing it into different activities. The magazine that the narrator worked for took on the job of recording all people who had died in the riots. The narrator also involved himself in this painstaking job. After nearly a year, Mr. Sorabjee requests him to make a trip to Nilgiris and stay for a few days in a place called Meham.

In Meham there seems to be a similar impending riot when he arrives on the scene due to the sectarian politics of Rajan from the local wing of Kadavul Katchi. In Meham, he meets two main characters – Noah the anti-hero and Rajan – the politician villain. Because of his recent experience in Mumbai, the narrator goes full swing into thwarting his plans. Noah remarks to Vijay – “That you have found a purpose after the trauma you have suffered is something we should be thankful for. But do not worry about this shrine. Nothing can destroy the handiwork of God” (139).

Another form of trauma the narrator suffers is cultural trauma. The idea of cultural trauma has been existent for some time in relation to postcolonial studies. In the postcolonial situation in the novel, the narrator finds himself trapped in his cultural situation during the Mumbai riots and the parallel events in Meham. The anti-secular agenda of Rajan is representative of the various factions that advocate one uniform religion. When Vijay is unable to change anything in Mumbai, he puts all his energy into balancing the situation in Meham by defending the Tower of God. Although Noah successfully defends the shrine, he loses his life in the process. Apart from the death of Noah, the sense of tragedy that nothing changes and that nothing will ever change leads to a terrible sense of desperation and he flees from India to Canada. Following the traumatic event and its impact, the victim of trauma resorts to several mental strategies to recuperate from the event's heavy blow to their sense of identity and individuality. In this novel, Vijay's life is much agitated by the incidents around him and his mere existence at the end of the novel is an achievement in itself.

Trauma has the effect of bringing about behavioral changes. The narrator had been idealistic until the traumatic events changed him into a realistic person. The basis for the narrator's anti-sectarian stand is visible in the beginning of the novel when he describes his position as “an oddity, a mongrel” (9) as he had been born out of an inter-caste marriage. In addition, his father had sympathy towards communism and never went to the temple and his mother had also stopped all religious beliefs until he had reached his teens. Hence, he did

not have much interest in religion. It was due to the deep sense of alienation that he felt in school and college that he felt a need to escape to some big city where hopefully there would not be much divisions of caste or religion. But he encounters the worst sectarian conflict imaginable during the Mumbai riots of December 1992. In fact, in the middle of the traumatic event, he has to resort to his identity to escape being brutalized or even murdered.

Apart from the neutrality of identity that is in the narrator, he also carries a genuine idealistic vision of a budding youth- a talented young man, he writes to Mr. Sorabjee- the editor of *The Indian Secularist*, and requests for a job with him and acquires it. His father who wishes the best for him, gives a word of advice – “‘What it comes down to in the end is timing and the last push forward. You’ve done everything you can to prepare, Vijay,’ my father said, ‘just don’t forget the final kick’” (21).

Vijay shows a more than natural drive to confront and block the advance of Rajan on the shrine due to the impact of the earlier trauma he underwent in Mumbai. Noah was an intelligent yet broken down man who lived in the cemetery as its caretaker. His knowledge of poetry and detachment from life amuse Vijay and a quick yet deep friendship arises between him and Noah. Rajan is the head of the local sectarian outfit and he is much ambitious. He hopes to achieve immediate fame and better his prospects by planting a statue of a deity on the top of a shrine that has so far been secular in that people of all religions come and worship there. Although Noah was reluctant to enter the scene, due to Vijay’s insistence and heated persuasion, he rises to the moment and defends the shrine. In the ensuing scuffle between Rajan and Noah, both of them fall off the precipice and are killed. Vijay feels guilty as it was he who had coaxed Noah into the scene. He thinks aloud about Noah: “‘He didn’t know what people like Rajan were capable of, he didn’t know how susceptible people with nothing else in their lives could be to the allure of religious feuding’” (140).

After Noah’s accidental plunge to death off the precipice of the shrine named Tower of God, Vijay turns inward, internalizing the tragedy and suffering from self-inflicted guilt. He writes:

I told myself that that if I hadn’t pushed him so hard he would still be alive, and I was furious with myself for straying beyond the boundaries of the assignment that had taken me to Meham. I bottled

all of this up, and as my obsession with Noah's death grew, my health suffered, the nightmares returned and the days crawled by, huge and oppressive, embroidered by the thoughts of the calamity. I began to neglect my work at the magazine, even to question our mission. What was the point of fighting on? I asked myself; people would continue to die in the name of God no matter what we did. (242)

The incident in Meham plunges him deeper into his traumatic suffering than the first traumatic event in Mumbai in which he felt he had failed as a journalist as well as humanist. He had sought relief from the traumatic blow to his identity by taking action against the negative forces in Meham and strove to achieve his self-identity as an effective social activist and journalist this time. But in effect, his very attempt to do so throws him back into trauma as he is unable to forgive himself for the death of Noah. The event leaves him completely demoralized and he is no longer able to blindly have hope that things may change in future towards a secular nation where people would no longer fight because of religion.

A critic observes Freud's view on latency thus:

... his elaboration of the concept of "latency," of how memory of a traumatic event can be lost over time but then regained in a symptomatic form when triggered by some similar event. In this way, each national catastrophe invokes and transforms memories of other catastrophes, so that history becomes a complex entangle- ment of crimes inflicted and suffered, with each catastrophe understood-that is, misunderstood-in the context of repressed memories of previous ones. (Berger 570)

The initial traumatic event in Mumbai is the reason that Vijay does everything he can to alter the incidents in Meham. The memory of one catastrophe modifies the other and changes Vijay's behaviour. He wishes to succeed and fulfil his ego as a journalist in Meham which he had failed in Mumbai. Unfortunately, Noah dies due to the modified sequence of events resulting from Vijay's behavioural changes. Mr. Sorabjee terms Noah to be an Emperor of the Everyday, and Vijay had been only a springboard that enabled Noah to achieve his true calling. He adds that we spend the early part of our lives making mistakes, and that leads to our finding ourselves, and then we act entirely on our own where important matters are concerned (243). This brief



discussion with Mr.Sorabjee does not entirely relieve the narrator of his self-inflicted guilt. In the closing lines of the novel, the narrator confesses how Noah's death has affected him thus –“the one who has passed on fuses with us, and we become a different person altogether. It is a condition of life that our beloved dead will never be forgotten” (244).

In effect Vijay becomes Noah (due to self-inflicted guilt) and Noah becomes Vijay. Noah had withdrawn himself from active living and survived on the periphery of the world by working as a vegetable gardener and caretaker of the cemetery, while Vijay was a full-fledge professional journalist, living his life in full force. By the end of the novel, Noah has risen to the occasion and lived his life out reaching his true purpose of fighting and defeating the extremist Rajan. But Vijay turns inward, and retreats into seclusion in Canada, carefully guarding his solitude. In fact, the name Vijay means victory. This victory is had by Noah. And the biblical Noah was a man who retreated into the ark along with all plants, animals and birds, to escape the deluge that God sent to renew the earth. In the novel at first it looks like Noah has truly retreated. But in reality, it is Vijay who retreats from all present reality and escapes to Canada.

The significance of traumatic narrative is an important feature in this novel. At the end of the novel, the narrator makes a final escape from reality which is too much for him by quitting his job and moving to Canada and working as a cashier in a bank and writing this book – *The Solitude of Emperors*. Living there for seven years helps him to heal. The act of writing what happened to him purges him of the traumatic impact of the event. Writing is one of the therapeutic devices used to treat trauma. Pennebaker writes on the result of one study as “The mere expression of a trauma is not sufficient. Health gains appear to require translating experiences into language” (164). The subject shows improvement in health when therapy includes physical movement as well as writing about the trauma.

A critic writes in his review about the belatedness of traumatic narratives:

Caruth argues that trauma as it first occurs is incomprehensible. It is only later, after a period of latency, that it can be placed in a narrative: "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located" (8). Traumatic narrative, then, is strongly referential,

but not in any simple or direct way. And the construction of a history develops from this delayed response to trauma, which permits history to arise where immediate understanding may not. (Berger 577, 578)

There are two main internal narratives that are recorded in the novel.- Sorabjee's text which he asks Vijay to read through named "The Solitude of Emperors: Why Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi Matter to Us Today"(61). It was a non-fictional narrative that Sorabjee had written to reach the younger generation in schools so that the future of India maybe secular. At three different points in the novel there are interspersed the narratives on Ashoka, Akbar and Gandhi, as Vijay reads the manuscript. Near the end of the novel, after the deaths of Noah and Rajan, Vijay writes a magazine article titled "Deaths in Meham" that dwell on the facts of the deaths. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that what we have been reading is a first-person narrative made by Vijay himself. A critic writes: "Indeed, theories of trauma can help to demystify all sorts of "narrative fetishes" (to use Eric Santner's term) and ideologies are effaced or "redeemed." For traumatic symptoms are not only somatic, nonlinguistic phenomena; they occur also in language" (Berger 574). The revelation of the meta-narrative simultaneously renders the trauma that the narrator has been writing into the novel all along. Language becomes a harness for the conveying of traumatic impact.

On the one hand we have the champions of a secular state – Mr.Sorabjee and Vijay recording traumatic events in their narratives, and also in recording the riots and its victims in their magazine named *The Indian Secularist*. On the other hand, we have Rajan plainly and bluntly propagating the cause of religious extremism which he whole heartedly believes in. It is this sort of "narrative fetish" that traumatic narratives seek to defeat by undermining and exposing them.

Trauma studies on postcolonial literature and that too on Indian writing in English is sparse. This study has attempted to study trauma in David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* and present the various traumatic events, impact of trauma and the various methods the narrator adopts in order to recuperate from trauma, with reference to the theory of trauma. The entire novel is a meta-narrative of the narrator's attempt to recuperate from various traumatic events. That the narrator completes his book is in itself a record of his recuperation.

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