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Trauma And Resilience In Craig Thompson's *Blankets*

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Abstract: Craig Thompson's *Blankets* is a graphic memoir that traces the turmoil in Thompson's life such as family dynamics, religious upbringing, first love, and personal struggles in search of self-identity. This article is an attempt to explore trauma and recovery in Craig Thompson's graphic memoir, *Blankets*, in the lens of Judith Herman's Trauma Recovery Theory. Judith Herman's theory of trauma recovery provides an insightful framework to analyze how the characters in *Blankets* navigate the traumatic experiences that haunt them. The study reveals how the three-phase recovery model outlined by Herman such as safety and stabilization, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life illuminates Craig's path towards healing and self-discovery. This analysis highlights the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of storytelling in understanding of trauma and recovery.

Index Terms - Recovery, Trauma, Resilience, Self-discovery, Healing.

In the late Twentieth Century, Graphic narratives became one of the powerful literary mediums. The publication of Craig Thompson's *Blankets* in 2003 pushed the limits of the genre to much greater heights. *Blankets* is an influential graphic memoir which has been extolled for its gripping narration and sublime illustrations. It is the coming-of-age story of Craig Thompson who undergoes various struggles in family, at school and within himself. The themes of the memoir include familial bond, self-discovery, religious faith, relationship dynamics, love, memory, isolation, trauma and resilience. This paper is an attempt to analyse Craig Thompson's *Blankets* through the lens of Judith Herman's Trauma Recovery Theory to explore the protagonist's experiences of trauma, coping mechanisms and the process of recovery. This paper is an effort to demonstrate the potential of human spirit to achieve resilience through different stages.

Judith Lewis Herman's Trauma Recovery Theory puts forth the fact that traumatic experiences are not just due to isolated events but are the results of an individual's psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships. Herman states that the key aspects that lead to trauma are manifold such as emotional numbness and detachment, dissociation, trouble in regulating emotions and so forth. According to Herman,

RECOVERY UNFOLDS in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life. Like any abstract concept, these stages of recovery are a convenient fiction, not to be taken too literally. They are an attempt to impose simplicity and order upon a process that is inherently turbulent and complex. (169)

The recovery process of Thompson from his traumatic experiences starts with his temporary escapes such as engaging himself in sketching and playing with his younger brother Phil during his childhood. When he is a young adult, he recalls his childhood days and mourns for it trying to make sense of his loss. Later, he integrates his memories from the past and attempts to define his identity especially beyond the confines of his family and religious upbringing when he becomes an adult.

It is vital to highlight that the root cause of sufferings in Thompson is multifarious. Thompson's family lived in a rural area of Wisconsin. His family was portrayed as a lower middle-class family with struggles to fulfil their basic needs. To illustrate, according to Thompson,

We lived in an old farmhouse with a heat circulation/ventilation problem. During summer, our parents forbade us from opening the windows in the daytime because heat that found its way in, ALWAYS STAYED. And all the ACCUMULATED WISCONSIN HUMIDITY would creep to the upper floor – to Phil's and my bedroom – and SETTLE in a SUFFOCATING mound. . . . Winter was worse, when our room became UNBEARABLY COLD. (67-72)

Moreover, his father and mother were conservative Christians. His father was very strict and authoritarian while his mother was compassionate and soft. His younger brother, Phil was more caring and protective towards him but not always.

To elaborate more on this, firstly, Thompson was brought up in a conservative and devout Christian household. The restrictive environment caused inner conflict in him as he questioned his faith and compared it with the stiff expectations imposed upon him. Secondly, Thompson's stringent father was another source of emotional struggle in him. To exemplify, one night when Thompson and Phil were fighting on the bed for having a better space in the bed and to have most of the blanket to themselves. His father appeared and shouted at them. When Thompson and Phil blamed each other, he was not ready to hear anything and he drew Thompson into a cubby hole. It was the forgotten place in the house which had barely breathable atmosphere because of dust and it was inhabited only by spiders and vermin.

Thirdly, he was bullied by his babysitter, his classmates and teachers as well. At home, he was not happy with what he had due to the financial conditions, stringent father and conservative atmosphere. At school, he was treated as if he was a filth by most of the teachers and worthless by his peers. According to Thompson,

As a child, I thought that life was the most horrible world anyone could ever live in, and that there HAD to be something better. . . . Every night I would scheme of running away. . . . But even then, I knew I was powerless to enact such a maneuver, that the REAL WORLD could only deliver new threats, and that I should be GRATEFUL for the security I did have. (38-41)

Thompson was an unhappy child but he had his own ways of escaping from his real-life traumas. He used to pretend and play with Phil, tried to sleep amidst the suffocation in his room so that he could have better dreams and engaged himself in sketching.

When he was a young adult, it was an arduous task for him to fit among his peers. He felt lonely and spent most of his time in isolation not only at school but also at home. He could not concentrate on his studies and his only way of getting out of his turmoil was sketching. Throughout the graphic memoir, one could observe that Thompson was trying hard to fit in the society and to establish better relationships. As a result, he could face only awful experiences. However, at one point of time in his life when he attended a Church camp, he found a ray of hope for his life. In the camp, he was intimidated by his peers, so he tried to run away and ended up joining a group of outcasts where he met Raina. Raina is a fellow Christian who later becomes his first love in the memoir. For the first time in his life, he succeeded in establishing a good relationship with her, and he even compared that phase of his life to be heaven exhibiting his faith on religion.

After the church camp, he did not have chances to meet Raina and he again started to feel the vacuum in his life. He approached his mother and expressed that he wanted to visit his friend Raina, in Michigan for two weeks. His mother told him that his father was not happy already as he had missed school. When Thompson approached his father, he asked him to score good grades at school, to attend school every day and to eat all his meat. At this phase, Thompson was seen with full of enthusiasm and concentration. He was not distracted

or disturbed by any external forces rather he had accomplished everything his father had told him. He not only attended school every day and got good grades but also started to eat meat which he once thought was disgusting. Finally, he got a chance to visit Raina. During his stay at Raina's place, Thompson recollected his past memories and processed his experiences which aided him in rebuilding his sense of identity amidst his conservative thoughts, his perceptions on establishment of relationships and coping mechanisms.

Raina impressed him in all the possible ways. Similar to Thompson, Raina also had to undergo so many traumatic events in her life. In other words, Raina's parents were undergoing divorce. She was forced to take care of her adopted brother Ben and sister Laura who were mentally disabled and she could not attend school regularly as she should take care of her siblings. In spite of all this Raina seemed to be clear in her ideologies, not so confused as Thompson. Thompson's relationship with Raina was always his source of energy and enthusiasm. In the due course of his stay at Raina's place, he was able to establish a sense of stability and safety. He started to regulate his emotions thereby learning to recognise the source of inner strength. At this phase of life, he established trust in himself and his creative abilities and he was able to successfully maintain a trusting relationship with Raina. The positive transformation of Thompson is assertive in the following lines,

Beautiful, confident, and open, Raina represents everything Craig craves. The friendship forged at camp turns into a long-distance relationship, and Craig experiences love for the first time. Here the blanket theme makes another appearance: Raina gives him a beautiful handmade quilt, each panel a pattern that reminds her of Craig. This is a blanket that comforts and protects. Through his relationship with Raina, Craig learns to value himself, to question what he has been taught, and to follow his dreams. Although the relationship does not last, its positive effect on Craig transforms him, allowing him to redraw his future. An eventual crisis of faith causes him to leave his home, his family, and his religion behind. (Fiske 1)

In the end of the memoir, Thompson moves out of his family after completing his schooling with a hope to live on his own. Thompson's relationship with Raina is broken as she tells him that she wanted to take care of her family and she is not in position to be committed in a relationship with him. Despite all these happenings, Thompson is seen with hope to lead his life on his own in a peaceful manner thus attaining resilience.

In a nutshell, it is evident that Thompson recovers from his trauma through different stages as stated in Herman's Trauma Recovery Theory. In the due course of the memoir, he experienced neglect, emotional and physical abuse, bullying and strained family dynamics which had a very big impact on his psychological well-being and dissociated him from the society. In the process of recovery, firstly, he tried to establish stability and safety thereby controlling his emotions and by establishing trust. Later, he developed a strong set of coping mechanisms especially through his art and creativity and through his relationship with Raina. In this stage, he gained strength from redefining his identity through his flashbacks and past memories. Finally, he broke free from his isolation thereby reconsidering his relationship dynamics. For instance, when he was a young adult, he lost his relationship with Phil but later he realised it and took effort to rejuvenate his relationship. The enduring power of this literary work is evident in its ability to reinstate the idea that the human spirit in spite of all the traumatic events can attain resilience.

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