



# A Shifting Paradigm In Trauma Studies: Issues And Challenges In Its Meta-Discourses

“We live in the age of anxiety” – Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*

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## Abstract:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the word 'trauma' is not only used as a homogenous medical concept but also considered as a multidimensional psychological and moral idea. Earlier it meant the physical injuries caused by the 'shocking event'. From that perspective, it was referring to only 'shock', letting the people paralyze in response. That's what is implanted in the common people – 'trauma' means 'shock'. The change did not take place until the emergence of Freud's psychological study of hysteria and unconsciousness in the 1920s. Following him, this stereotypical illusion gets vaged with further analysis of 'trauma' by different distinguished theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Michael Alexander, Dominick LaCapra, etc. The study of psychological trauma steers at high speed especially after the Second World War. The journey does not even stop here. Parallely it glides into its transitional moral phase after the 1970s. Here it extends its wing in any protest and violence, be it regional racial or religious, or communal. The ethical values fade away and moral judgment gets challenged. Thus, this paper aims at presenting all of these transitional phases including the discussion of socio-cultural-political dimensions. The 'mobility' in this field galvanizes the connection of different discourses simultaneously. It also focuses on the interconnection of diverse genres and generations with their heterogeneous lenses and temperaments.

**Keywords:** Trauma Studies, Medical, Psychological, Moral, Multidimensional, Multidisciplinary, Multigenerational

## **Introduction:**

The modern age is an age of Trauma. According to American Psychological Association (APA), trauma is “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster”. This trauma is an extended form of the disorder, be it caused by physical, mental, or moral. It is defined as ‘physical injury’, ‘re-appearance of images of past in psyche’, and ‘moral dilemma’. These definitions are contextualized in different fields of discourses such as war, ethnicity, indigeneity, etc. In each of these cases, the common characteristic is violent intensity and its aftermath. Trauma comes into existence when the situation becomes uncontrollable. It transforms its responsiveness as the mind gets involved and inflicted by the overwhelming feeling of loss, anxiety, anguish, etc. Therefore, it breaks the stereotypical myth, that is, trauma means to shock and establishes a more extended version of ideology where the parameters of other disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and religion are also touched. Besides interdisciplinary, it also indicates the intergenerational phenomena, that is, even the trauma of youth is different from the trauma of adults. The dynamic diversity and the mysterious identification of this field authenticate Caruth's statement: "Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it, involves, suggests a certain paradox: the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness" (1996: 92). The requirement of ‘belatedness’ reminds of one Bengali song so-called ‘Gobhire Jao’ by Rupankar Bagchi: "Go deeper, go deeper/ Go deeper, go deeper/ I just reached the bottom surface, and lost/ If necessary, then sink". (English Translation) This kind of show-hide game characterizes the symptoms of trauma studies, making it a thrust area of contemporary times.

## Importance of Trauma studies

It helps us to study any catastrophe, be it natural or cultural that includes the events like global warming, war, flood, storm, ethnic conflicts, Partition, Migration, exile, etc. It makes us comprehend any incomprehensible reflected in the aftermath of events in the form of a nightmare. Thus, the power of this field flies beyond the visible sphere. It provides an alternative interpretation and authorizes the latter one to be true. It has become a thirst area not only for medical science, sociology, and psychology but for literary studies. It can also be studied about different discourses and contexts such as gender, climate, Anthropocene, borderlands, etc. What ties them up is their collective and cultural nature rather than one's individual nature. It makes people aware of any despicable condition with proper knowledge along with studying the symptoms properly. Through the trauma narrative (expressed in language), an alternative history comes into existence. Even after the recent Corona pandemic, when the 'new normal' is an integral part of our lives, trauma studies are the noteworthy field of evaluating the integrity of life and its existence. Between life and death, it secures its space. Last but not least, it has the retrospective power to re-enliven the past, which is not one's own but a shared experience as Caruth writes in her interpretation of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1996: 24).

## Genealogy of Trauma and Medical Dimension

The term 'Trauma' derives from the Greek word meaning 'wound'. This 'wound' refers to the physical injury caused by railway accidents in which the spiral bone is under heavy risk, what John Eriksen (1866) has named the theory of 'Railway spine'. The time that the study marks as its origin is around the early 19<sup>th</sup> century or specifically 1830s. However, the growth came in the 1990s based on the pluralistic models of trauma. The American Psychiatric Association's new classification of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) crystallized the medicalization of trauma in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders third edition (DSM-III) published in 1980. The DSM-III classified the external stressor for PTSD as "a psychologically distressing event outside the range of usual human experience" that is accompanied by "intense fear, terror, and helplessness" and causes "significant distress in most people" (DSM-III: 236–8, 248). The current DSM-IV classifies PTSD as a trauma or stressor-related disorder rather than an anxiety disorder. It is the part of terrorist damage, what Hermann Oppenheim (1889) calls 'traumatic neurosis'. The best evidence is found in

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* where the main protagonist Animal (a disabled boy) is the product of the Bhopal Gas tragedy. The catastrophe of 'that night' paralyzes his identity of human self into a non-human self. He undergoes a tremendous 'toxic consciousness'. That requires the proper care and medical treatment. Even in films like *Taare Zameen Par* where the eight-year-old boy Ishaan suffers from Dyslexia, *Dear Zindagi* where Kaira searches for a psychologist for her insomnia, and *Laal Singh Chadda* where Laal is set with 'leg braces' to correct 'a curved spine'.

## Psychological Phase

This phase did not come into existence until the First World War took place and conceptualized the fact that trauma is not only medical but also psychological. As there was no X-ray system, so many diseases were difficult to catch. This requires an eminent psychologist. Figures like Freud, Caruth, LaCapra, etc. explore it from the psychological point of view. It ranges from hysteria to memory, and from shell shock to psychotherapy. For them, Trauma is 'possession of past', 'repetition of past', 'lack of witness' 'unable to respond to the stimulus', and 'repetitive compulsion'. Traumatic remembrance is what Breuer and Freud (1955) term "pathogenic reminiscences" (40). For Freud (1920), the traumatic events create a 'split' in the egoistic self that appears in the dream later on (8). Caruth on the other hand views trauma as the 'fragment Consciousness'. Caruth explains that trauma is "a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 1996: 61). Trauma is also formulated in the form of a nightmare consisting of both types of images – the memory of glorifying past and the images of uncanny and grotesque events. In the case of events like Kashmir Insurgency, the Kashmiri Pandits are forcefully out of their own native place and are forced to a life of refugee in their own country. For them, what is more, traumatic except the violence is their memory of the past. Even after the whitewashed of them from their geographical space, the images they carry are unforgettable, as evident in famous literary masterpieces like *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*, *A Long Dream of Home*, *The Odyssey of Kashmiri Pandits*, etc.

## Configuring Moral and Ethical Ground

Experimenting with the current day 'victimhood', Fassin and Rechtman (2009) state: "Rather than a clinical reality, trauma today is a moral judgment" (284). This means that the vulnerable subjects should be looked at through the moral values and responsibility of every individual. This ethical turn takes place in the aftermath of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), which is caused by external forces. Therefore, psychoanalysis requires an ethical dimension. The diagnosis that the ethical turn requires has pointed to "a specific social agent – an individual, a social group or an institution- who can be held morally, politically, and legally responsible for the suffering" (Brunner 23). Naomi Mandel's *Against the Unspeakable: Complicity, the Holocaust, and Slavery in America* (2006) argues that the traditional concept of trauma as unspeakable is a "discursive production" that evades moral responsibility in representing atrocity by privileging the "problems inherent in speech" rather than addressing the "ethical obligations involved in such representations (Mandel 2006: 4, 5). In case of the events like Apartheid and the Holocaust, the survivor requires moral treatment rather than physical therapy. For instance, the occupation of Tibet by China is a kind of moral threat. Their politics of Communism overpowers the Tibetan religiosity of Buddhism. Consequently, ethical principles like honesty and non-violence are threatened. A kind of dystopian society gets established where the lack of morals sets up the traumatic situation, as witnessed in different literary pieces like *The Tibetan Suitcase: A Novel* and *Lives in Exile*. Thus the truth of trauma lies not in the brain or mind but in the moral judgement of contemporary society.

### Intersection of Multidiscourses

Trauma studies bridge the different disciplines like sociology, law, philosophy, and literary studies. It incorporates socio-cultural discourses to experience one phenomenon. According to this discourse, the collective consciousness is much more prioritized than the individual self. Critics like Erickson promote this 'collective experience' as a 'cultural trauma' that generates out of 'the centrifugal force' of one group sent into a corner. As a result, the 'legitimate victimization' comes into the discussion. To discuss the legal dimension, the politics of trauma shapes the 'subjectivity' of the victims that recall the socialization and objectivization on emotional grounds. Apart from that, it is contextualized in other sub-discourses such as Partition, Holocaust,

War, Gender, Racism, Anthropocene, Climate change, Disability, Memory practices, Migration, Refugee, Media, and Pandemic. The trauma that binds these discourses is the trauma of loss caused by the desperate feeling of alienation. Trauma is here made as a constructed feeling in three consecutive processes- pre-event, the event itself, and post-event. The aftermath of the event seems more traumatic than the event itself because the impact sustains for long. For instance, Gitanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* deals with the trauma of Partition, especially expressed through the grief-stricken Ma. She behaves abnormally after the demise of her husband. Her personal loss allied with the outside turmoils results in trauma.

### **Multigenerational Interface**

Trauma Studies are multigenerational in nature. It is intergenerationally tangible. it affects the different ages differently. In other words, there lies a difference in response to trauma between youth and adult generational people. Henry Krystal in his book entitled *Trauma and Aging* explains the different attributes associated with the two different age groups. Whereas the first one, Infantile trauma is characterized by frantic responses, freezing, and analitic depression, the latter one, Adult trauma is marked by the presence of unavoidable danger and submission to the inescapable stimulation that the stern calls 'catanoid reaction'. There is a lot of evidence found in the book called *Lives in Exile*, which is centered on the tales of three generational loss. Here whereas the first generation realizes that getting their home back is next to impossible, and thus surrenders to their destiny, the subsequent two generations are frenzy enough to opt for the 'homeland'. Discussing the third generation, who was completely born and brought up in the 'promised land', becomes part of the quest for the native land. They establish the 'borrowed land' as an 'imaginary homeland'.

### **Conclusion:**

In short, this field of study can make us able to comprehend the incomprehensible. Although this field is destructural over a period of time, the problem occurs in its continuous process. It is non-stop transferrable unless the discussion of that event would not pass into another generation. Indeed, it takes place in the name of development. More, it blurs the demarcation between victims and non-victims, universalizing the 'status of victimhood'. Consequently, Personal becomes political. Therefore, Hartman and his colleagues (1995) call for new awareness, that is, "Ethical as well as clinical" (541). More, trauma studies hold transcendental

approaches, which Step Craps (2013) calls out a "promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement" that Western metaphysics of trauma theory fails to encapsulate (2).

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