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RESEARCH ARTICLE

NEGOTIATING VIOLENCE, TRAUMA, AND MEMORY IN SHASHI DESHPANDE'S SELECT SHORT STORIES

Sonika Thakur¹ and Professor Tej N. Dhar²

1. Ph.D. Research Scholar Shoolini University, Himachal Pradesh, India.
2. School of Liberal Arts Shoolini University, Himachal Pradesh, India.

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Abstract

Violence and trauma form a significant feature of world literature as part of the human condition since times immemorial, though the modes of their presentation have changed from time to time. Violent and distressful scenes in fiction are not only meant to remind the readers of their presence in their lives but also to show how people respond to them in different ways: by succumbing to them or by fighting them. The present paper aims to show how Shashi Deshpande weaves scenes of violence and trauma in the texture of her stories and how their memory not only causes pain and agony to the people who are affected by them but also works as therapy for some. She makes us aware that storytelling has long been used to help individuals process and cope with such challenging circumstances. In stories like "Anatomy of Murder," "A Liberated Woman," "The Inner Rooms," "Memorabilia," "It was Dark," "The Homecoming," and "Lost Springs," Deshpande shows how the characters suffer violence, are plagued by traumatic memories, and learn to fight back the perpetrators of violence, and even save the others too.

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Introduction:-

Violence is when someone or something is harmed or injured by physical force. Violence comes in many forms, such as physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence, and structural violence where institutions and societal structures uphold wrongdoings and inequality. Trauma is the psychological reaction to a distressing or upsetting experience. Trauma can take different forms, including acute trauma where a single traumatic incident is referred to; chronic trauma is ongoing, such as being subjected to abuse or neglect over an extended period of time; complex trauma is both persistent and takes place in the context of relationships, like child abuse or domestic violence; and secondary trauma is about people who work with or provide care for those who have experienced trauma, such as emergency personnel, medical professionals, or therapists. In addition, various other kinds of trauma also find expression in works of literature; such as, war-related trauma, sexual abuse or trauma, post-colonial trauma, race-based trauma, genocide, or the Holocaust as a collective trauma, trauma of displacement or of refugees.

In addition, memory has emerged as a prominent field of study in recent decades with the growth of memoirs, confessional writings, testimonials, and historical explorations. Like trauma, memory is also related to past events and happenings which have impacted human psyche and the way of living as a result. The intersection of personal and collective memory is a complex like trauma.

Corresponding Author:- Sonika Thakur

Address:- Ph.D. Research Scholar Shoolini University, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Violence and trauma figure in literature for several reasons, from examining the human condition to emphasising the effects of violence, as in novels, such as *Lord of the Flies*, *Crime and Punishment*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Fine Balance*, *The God of Small Things*, *Midnight's Children*, *The Shadow Lines* and *The White Tiger*. These novels deal with themes like barbarism, bloodshed, slavery, honour, and retaliation, violence to control over society, moral issues and psychological effects of violent crime, and racial injustice and brutality respectively.

Violence figures in short stories as well, in "The Lottery," "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "Cathedral." Violent scenes in short stories are intense and distressing and used to good effect to deal with significant human issues.

Like violence, trauma too figures in long and short fiction to explore how it affects people in different ways or to show how resilient the human spirit is. The short stories like "Sikka Badal Gaya" or "The New Regime" deal with the suffering and brutalities caused by the partition; "The Blue Umbrella" examines the trauma of loss and the challenges of coping with grief; and "The Postmaster" explores the trauma of loneliness and the power of human connection.

The depiction of traumatic scenes in fiction helps an ordinary reader to identify himself with the protagonist or character. It also helps him to make sense of the painful situation he has gone through or is going through. This reliving of the horrific experience helps him to comprehend the tragedy of his past through his own reconstructed memories and struggles he has encountered.

The stories usually make use of the technique of narrative dissociation to create a pattern of trauma which includes devices like disjunction in time or various points of view so that the reader can reflect on his mental condition. The use of inter-textuality, fragmentation, repetition, and experiments in language, which are normally associated with postmodern fictional style, are widely used in works that deal with violence and trauma.

Trauma is a wound, not just physical but also psychological or emotional. It is the response of an individual who has suffered mental upheaval or threat that has affected his very existence. Though trauma studies gained prominence around 1990s, its roots go far back in time, in the studies and investigations in the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis, and PTSD. The present trauma theory has been shaped by these precursors along with the efforts and insights by the European practitioners and neurologists of late nineteenth-century, such as Jean-Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Josef Breuer, and Sigmund Freud. Freud defined trauma as an overwhelming event which cannot be processed normally at the time of occurrence, so its memory is blocked and thus torments the victim afterwards. William James compares trauma to a foreign object which is stuck to psyche like a thorn which is covered or hidden from outside but keeps festering and causing problems. It must be extracted and treated.

Literary trauma theory claims that there is a special connection between words and wounds, and literature helps with insight into this relationship, giving it shape and substance. The field of trauma studies includes how trauma affects the psychology of an individual, how it is represented in language, and how its memory helps in shaping the individual and cultural identities. Any extreme experience and its effect on identity and memory are studied by pairing the post-structural, socio-cultural, and post-colonial theories with psychoanalytical theories to form a solid basis of criticism. So, trauma studies explore the representation and understanding of trauma in literature by analysing its psychological and cultural significance.

In literary studies, feminist approaches have helped writers to treat trauma as a complex and layered phenomenon that cannot be understood in isolation. The emphasis is on seeing the traumatic experience not as pathological but as adaptive responses where female trauma survivors must be treated in collective self-care. As a writer, Shashi Deshpande, who gives voice to the problems and issues of women, has tried to explore the theme of violence and trauma in her short stories, in which she employs memories, flashbacks, fragmentation, and other post-modern strategies. The essay analyses her seven short stories namely: "Anatomy of Murder," "A Liberated Woman," "The Inner Rooms," "Memorabilia," "It was Dark," "The Homecoming," and "Lost Springs" to show how she treats violence and trauma in them.

The first story "It was Dark" is about a fourteen-year-old girl who has suffered rape, and exemplifies the idea of Cathy Caruth that the traumatized find it difficult to speak. Caruth was the first to formulate that trauma is an unspeakable wound and asserted that it can be more psychological than restricted to physical. The story has both

these dimensions, for the girl who has been raped has suffered a physical wound and a psychological wound. Her trauma is unravelled slowly as the story progresses, but its intensity is not known till the end. She is so traumatized that she has virtually frozen in time.

Her experience has been used by the writer to show its familial and social reactions. The social reaction is of the neighbours who come to the home of the girl to sympathise with the family and the familial reaction is dramatized by the response of her father and mother. The trauma of the daughter reminds the mother of her own childhood violence, when she was forced by a man to see him and then after her marriage, when her husband expected total surrender from her on their wedding night, snapping at her fear and innocence. The father is least worried about his daughter, though she is like a bundle of frozen flesh. He is more worried about her possible pregnancy and the immediate remedial action of an abortion. He pesters his wife about questions related to her periods. The mother works hard to enable her to come out of her shock and restore her to her normal self.

The story records the reactions of the family of three to the ghastly violence on the teenage girl. The girl is in a state of shock and quiet; her mother is agitated and sad; and her father is angry, frustrated, and ashamed. The concern of neighbours about the victim intensifies the tension between them, because the mother is least interested in explaining anything to them and listening to their sympathetic words, and the father is embarrassed by answering the neighbours and police.

The impact of the experience on the little girl is so deep that she seems lost and remains in her bed with minimal movements and just staring blankly on the ceiling above her. Her mother's efforts to make her speak, but all that it results in is the "constant swivelling of her eyes, like a person searching for something." (129) Her condition breaks her heart, but she perseveres, makes her respond to the heart of the mother, and all that she succeeds in doing is let her come out of her darkness and respond to the daylight and her presence.

The second story "The Homecoming" has a similar subject, in which a young girl Anju is physically abused and beaten by her husband within few days of their love marriage. The girl who is rebellious by nature leaves her mother's dingy hut to realize her dreams. She defies her mother's warning and marries a person of another caste, of another culture in a hope to get rid of her poverty. But she is traumatized so much by her husband that she returns to her mother just few days after her marriage as a quiet being. Her little sister Suman sees the marks of injury on her uncovered back, "the scars... some of them still raw oozing blood." (155) The only thing she tells her family is that "I'm not going back." The domestic violence she suffers makes her totally quiet and unaware of her condition, for she reeks of unwashed clothes, uncombed hair and blood.

The story records the reaction of Ai, Suman, Tai, and the victim herself. Ai, her mother is angry because Anju has defied her by marrying a stranger, but she feels powerless in interfering in her life, for now she is her husband's property or liability. Her younger sister Suman sympathizes with her but fails to help her when one night her husband takes her forcefully. The scene of violence has been described graphically: "...the man holding Anju with one hand, while with the other he was hitting her, anywhere, everywhere, banging her head against the wall at the same time." (159). Though Suman is denied help by her landlady Tai, which shocks her, she is still determined to help her sister, which provides the only sign of hope in the story. Tai is too shocked after witnessing the violence that she withdraws herself back in her house instead of helping the girl. And the victim Anju is quiet and immovable fixed at one place, unaware of her surroundings, her family and her own condition, as if in a trance.

The "Anatomy of Murder" is the story of a violent murder, with an air of suspense to it. The narrator, almost like a newspaper reporter, states two intriguing facts about the murder of a forty-year-old woman in her flat by a young boy who is found by the police by the side of her dead body, with no understandable reasons for the deed, neither robbery nor rape. The lack of motive for a murder hints at some unusual reason for the act. So, the narrator untangles it first by providing vital details about the physical and mental makeup of the murderer. He is a poor boy from a chawl but high on dreams, aping the muscular film stars, fantasizing about "overpowering girls and villains," "almost an animal in his unthinking awareness of anything but his own pleasures," (19) and confusing dreams with reality.

A chance encounter in the store, where he works, with the woman he kills opens almost a new door in his life. When her elbow hits the tins he is carrying and they scatter on the floor, he rebukes her, but she gathers the tins and says sorry to him. Since the novelty of the experience is in stark contrast with the life he has known till then, he

tries his best to make sense of it, but fails. He is upset emotionally and experiences “violence which made him sick and crazy” (21). Back in his room which is full of smells and squalor he is hit by his mother’s ungainly figure, which contrasts with the woman he had met in the store.

When the boy sees the woman again in the store smiling at her son lovingly, he remembers how this contrasts severely with his mother’s behaviour towards him. Several other unpleasant memories from his past hit him hard. He pines for the woman’s visit and craves for her smile. Due to his growing restlessness, this new encounter leaves him in a state of trance and intensifies his obsession with her. His repressed desires, increased sense of self-worth, and ongoing bewilderment keep him in a state of turmoil.

When he goes to her flat, he realizes that despite his obsession with her, he hardly existed in her world. Feeling that he was like “dwindling, disappearing, and dematerializing” (24) his urgency to enter her world intensifies to such an extent that he wants to “smash his way into the centre of her consciousness,” which he feels he can do only by hurting her. So, he tightens his grip on her neck till she stops breathing. Realizing that he had lost the chance of entering her world again, he is filled with grief.

The violence in the story results from the contrast between two kinds of experiences of the boy, which are built with great skill, in which memory plays a crucial role. The unpleasantness of his past contrasts with what he sees as a variation on what could have been possible. Since he fails to understand the reasons behind this contrast and because of the strong streak of animality in him, his response to the contrasting realities only excites his emotions, which result in the insane murder of the woman.

Another short story “A Liberated Woman” depicts a confrontation between a high salaried educated wife and less salaried prejudiced husband. The deep-seated prejudices and complexes of the husband are set against the modern liberated outlook of the educated woman. The husband suffers from inferiority complex, which results in his aggressive behaviour towards his wife.

She understands that her unpleasant situation is because she inhabits a male-dominated society and speaks about it to an old friend of hers. The woman is physically abused and raped by her husband because he is frustrated by her ability and her higher earnings. Though in the eyes of the community she is considered the epitome of modernity and power, she turns into a frightened rat during the night at her home: “...at night I become just a terrified animal...I can’t fight back either, he’s too strong for me.” (42) She fears his physical strength which she cannot match, and their kids sleeping in the adjacent room.

She claims that her husband abuses her when he is in an unconscious state, for the morning after that he is shocked by her damaged and injured body. She laments her “marriage where lovemaking has become an exercise in sadism.” (39) In her fright, she has made the decision not to mention this thing to him saying, “...We have built up a wall of silence between us. And as long as it isn’t broken, I can pretend....it won’t happen again.” (42)

The violence inflicted upon the woman is unbearable but more shocking is the fact that she has accepted this as her punishment for defying the social order of marrying a man of another cast and bringing shame and pain to the parents. It is ironic that a brave woman like her who could defy traditional social norms is not able to do anything to come out of her predicament for fear that the society would question her initial decision of marrying out of her caste.

The fifth story “The Inner Rooms” is about the three sisters, Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika, who were kidnapped by Bhishma and forcibly married off to his frail brother Vichitravirya. The women are the victims of physical and psychological abuse perpetrated by a haughty man, in violation of social norms that forbid them from voicing their objections or using reason. They are captured like stray animals, thrown into a chariot, and carried away. Amba struggles against this brutality, but she is overcome by laws established by the males. She realizes that “she was only a woman, she was to be disregarded, ignored; her will, her determination had to be set aside as nothing.” (90) She captures the tragedy of her situation, when she says: “How foolish I was, she thought, to let my happiness depend on other people! My nurse at first, then my mother, my father, my sisters and finally Salva. What a burden to put on others, the burden of your own happiness.” (96) When she is humiliated by a man, she thinks of herself as a burden to everyone who knew her right from the second she was born.

When her pleas are ignored and she is deprived of what she wants, she decides to die with pride. She sets herself on fire in her anguish, "A spark, a small glow. And suddenly she was confronted by flames. There was a moment's panic as she realized she was trapped again." (94) The fire burned quickly and fiercely and when the flames touched her body, "...she began to scream. Shripping, anguished cries that were her last tenuous link to the world she had so angrily rejected." (94) The character's fight with society and with herself drives her to do the horrifying act of setting herself on fire in order to die with respect if not live that way. Thus the story, though mythological, clearly shows that nothing has changed since then; women are tormented and subjugated by men even today. The trauma of her being rejected and treated as pawn by the men is doubled by her realization as being an insignificant being forces her to put her life to an end by putting herself ablaze at the end.

Another story "Memorabilia" highlights how the memory of an unpleasant experience in the childhood can hamper one's adult life. The story inter-mingles the horrifying experiences of two mothers concerning the birth of children. The old box of kumkum triggers the old painful memory of the death of the narrator's mother giving birth at very young age. Her memories are of a child, "...everything sharp-edged, nothing softened by time, emerging with a child's focus, a child's directness." (107) She painfully rues over the demands of a patriarchal family which forces a woman to give birth to children after children to increase the progeny of the family. Her mother was forced to give birth every year at her parent's home, with no facilities, no transportation, and no medical assistance. The memory of the final moments of her mother remains fresh in her mind even at the time she herself becomes a mother and grows old. She confesses that during her pregnancies and even during deliveries, she used to see and feel clearly the ghosts of her dead mother and her small sister by her side.

The memory of her mother's long hair streaming down to the floor and, "...something falling on the ground, thick drops of something red...blood everywhere. She bled to death." remains with her during all her pregnancies. (109) She used to have constant flashes of her dying mother, "...lying on the floor in her own blood...how tiny and shrunken she had seemed when lifted." (111) She used to fear that, "...all my blood, my life itself, would go out of my body with the baby. Each time I was pregnant, I kept seeing her and my little sister. I could really see her." (111) The trauma of seeing her dead mother with blood-smeared hair and shrunken body haunted her all her life and disturbed her during her four pregnancies. She used to imagine that her own children were crying like her little sister, who died soon after her mother because of neglect. The memory of this trauma remained with her till she became old, but it also strengthened her to say no after her fourth pregnancy, which her mother could not do.

In "Lost Springs" the memory of the unpleasant death of her mother leads to her separation from her brothers and exile to her grandparents' home as punishment for causing her mother's suicide. This memory hits the narrator while she is holidaying with her husband on an island and sees somebody floating in the pool of the hotel. She "...moved closer, a little fearfully, and saw that the upturned face was that of a dead woman." (72) But soon realizes that it is just a hallucination, which triggers the memory of her childhood and all the threads related to her ties with her father and brothers. The fact that the siblings lost intimacy after the death of their mother was incomprehensible to her, but things clarify after the death of her father. She feels "Death had opened a door and I had no control over what emerged from it. Flashes and bits came to me at odds." (73)

The narrator uses various symbols which remind her of her childhood and mother like 'comb', 'pool', 'river', 'dark', 'light'. Her father trying to comb her hair and then cutting it short made her mother sad and she remembered her sobbing incessantly, feeling afraid. Then the pool at hotel and the sight of dead body floating in it brings back the childhood memory of her mother's sickness and drowning. She remembers clearly her mother being kept in a dark room as she suffered from TB and the others enjoyed sunshine. And she can clearly see her mother's room full with light one day with all windows opened to clean it after her death which erased all her presence from the room.

Another facet of her life is revealed which she deliberately or in fear tried to brush aside all these years. She realizes that in reality she was the cause of her mother's untimely death. This guilt remained with her all these years but hidden somewhere in subconscious mind. But with the revelation at the pool, everything comes back to her slowly. She can fathom her distant relationship with her brothers and father who sent her to her grandparents' house as a punishment.

The cause of her mother's decision to drown her is revealed in the middle of the story where the narrator recalls her being the only girl child, of seven, gets a girl as her companion and rejoices in her company. The river again comes as a mediator to connect her cause of anger and her angry blurting about her father being happy and playful with the

young girl while swimming in the river along with her brothers. The constant teasing of her brothers and subsequent making fun of her by her girl partner leaves her heart broken and hurt. She rushes home in anger and in that sense of being cheated she blurts everything without thinking the effect upon her mother. The face of mother turns pale and she drowns herself the very night. As a consequence, the siblings get separated forever. Thus, her realization at the end that an innocent annoyance with her girl companion, she became the cause of her mother's death and family disintegration.

So, the stories deal with the impact of both physical and mental violence on people and how the traumatic experiences of the past plague their lives for ever, but also give them courage and hope to fight back the perpetrators of the violence. In "It was Dark" the mother, a victim of violence resolves to bring her daughter back to normalcy and fight those who believe that submission is the key to a girl's peaceful life. "The Inner Rooms" also refutes the idea of male superiority and the violence men inflict on women thinking them weak and defenceless. Here, Amba stands tall in front of all males who tried to subjugate her and force her to accept their rigid rules. She ends her life only when she finds that she cannot fight back her oppressors. In "Memorabilia" the resolution of a mother not to lose her life in childbearing as her mother did also celebrates human resilience and spirit. Her constant fear and traumatic memory of her mother's death gave her clear idea to fight the orthodox beliefs of having more children. In "Lost Springs" the paranormal revelation brings back all childhood trauma bits by bits by making the narrator realize and understand various things about her relationship. In "The Homecoming" the little sister Suman resolves to get justice for her sister Anju who suffers domestic violence by bringing her back from the clutches of her abusive husband.

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