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Trauma and Identity in Teju Cole's Novel *Open City* and Samuel Shimon's Novel *An Iraqi in Paris*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: This paper presents the argument that trauma has a significant impact on the formation of a new resilient identity that relies on survival and success. The paper is divided into two sections. The first section includes the introduction that discusses the relation between trauma and identity in the field of Literary Studies. The introduction also presents the development of trauma and identity which begins in the field of Psychoanalysis and then moves into the field Literary Studies in order to represent and externalize the traumatic experience through literary narratives. The second section discusses the impact of the traumatic experience on the construction of a new resilient identity throughout a comparative analysis of two literary texts; namely *Open City* by Teju Cole and *An Iraqi in Paris* by Samuel Shimon. The paper ends with a conclusion that answers the question of whether a new resilient identity, that is characterized by survival and success, can be formed under the impact of trauma or not.

Keywords: Trauma, Identity, Resilience, Survival, Expatriation, Exile, Literary Studies

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1. Introduction

Trauma and identity set as two significant concepts that coexist in the field of Literary Studies. Literary texts are considered as fertile grounds on which the truth of the traumatic experience and its long-term impact on the construction of identity can be found. The relation between trauma and identity functions on individual and collective levels. For Jeffrey C. Alexander et.al., trauma is a horrendous event that afflicts both individuals and collectivities [1]. On the individual level, the traumatic incident leaves indelible marks on the body and psyche of individuals. Trauma disrupts their memories and changes their future identities irrevocably. On the collective level, Kai T. Erikson describes trauma as a disruption to the bonds that attach a group of people. The traumatic experience shatters their sense of communality [2], [3].

The beginnings of the studies that discuss the traumatic experience and its long-term impact on identity initiate in the field of Psychoanalysis. The studies later move into the field of Literary Studies. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the nineteenth-century researchers, such as Sigmund Freud, Joseph Breuer, Pierre Janet, and Jean-Martin Charcot study the impact of a traumatic hysteria on the human psyche retrospectively [4]. The final results of their research state that the original traumatic event itself is not as much traumatic as its remembrance in the present. Freud and his fellows diagnose the traumatic hysteria of male patients in the aftermath of the First World War. They observe that the

symptoms of the traumatic hysteria appear as aftereffects of the traumatic incident; not the incident per se [5].

Later researchers in the 1990s represented by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman contribute to the psychoanalytical perception of trauma and its impact on identity. They draw attention to the significance of representation of the traumatic experience in literary texts [6], [7]. Caruth maintains that the severe event which shatters identity can now be represented while the traumatic experience haunts the survivors' individual and collective identity in the present. Caruth demonstrates, through narrative texts, that the identity of the present becomes in a paradoxical state as it negotiates the existence of a new self and the recurrence of the past traumatic experience at the same time [8].

The emergence of the new self occurs as a result of crisis. According to Erik H. Erikson, identity is a growth of personality that stems from inner and outer conflicts in a form of a crisis that ends with unity and a new individual and collective identity [9]. Crisis, here, encompasses the traumatic experience that changes identity on individual and collective levels. Erikson maintains that identity, in essence, develops as a psychosocial process in which eight main stages function throughout a human lifespan. At the end of each stage, trauma occurs as a crisis. The process of identity development starts with childhood and ends with death. Erikson presents the human growth from the point of view of the inner and outer conflicts where a vital personality emerges with an enhanced inner coherence and with a consolidated ability "to do well" according to his own individual standards and to the collective standards of his society as well [10]. The inner conflicts which resemble the aftereffects of the traumatic experience construct a distinct personality. This personality or identity starts developing with the stage of trust that meets the crisis of mistrust in childhood. The second stage is autonomy versus doubt and shame, which Erikson describes as two inseparable entities. The third stage is initiative versus guilt in which personality reconsiders its strength. The fourth stage includes industry versus inferiority which is followed by the stage of identity versus confusion. The sixth stage is intimacy versus isolation. The seventh stage is generativity versus stagnation [11]. The last stage is integrity versus despair that marks the final construction of the new identity. Apparently, the ascendance of each stage meets its crisis, then finds its solution. The new identity is born from the traumatic crisis of mistrust, doubt and shame, guilt, inferiority, confusion, isolation, stagnation and despair.

2. Materials and Methods

The impact of the traumatic crisis transforms the individual and collective awareness into a new identity that relies on a compromise between two entities; the old identity prior to the traumatic experience and the new identity that carries the aftermath of the traumatic experience. The new identity attempts at the restoration of the previous wholeness which has once been fractured by trauma. The voice of the new identity which results from the traumatic experience is to be represented through language. Indeed, the representation of this voice, in literary texts, brings the truth of both the traumatic experience and the new identity simultaneously. Literary texts are, therefore, best representations for a reliable conveyance of the truth of trauma and its impact on the formation of a new individual and collective identity. It is also important to follow the fact that the representation of the traumatic experience and its subsequent impact that creates a new identity derives its material from the past, only can the traumatic experience and its aftereffects function through the remembrance of the wound in the present; not in the time of occurrence. The struggle between the wounds of the past and the attempt to cope with these wounds in the present take place in the in-between position where the new identity can be found. Homi Bhabha describes this position as a third space of representation. Bhabha perceives the new identity as a hybrid identity that results from the trauma of racism and colonialism. Within the third space of hybridization, the new identity exposes the conspiracy of silence and

presents a powerful voice against trauma. Bhabha also suggests that modern early colonial literature is able to transform the imperial and “colonial triumphalism” into a testimony through which the traumatized individuals and communities construct a new resilient identity that relies on survival.

3. Results and Discussion

One salient example of such identity is the African-American identity. The African-American identity, for instance, constructs as a result of the trauma of colonialism and slavery. The traumatic experience of slavery has been represented for decades through African-American literature [12]. For Ron Eyerman, the trauma of slavery and its representation in the African-American literature and music during the Harlem Renaissance Era reshapes suffering and turns it into a new foundation. Eyerman also indicates that individual and collective memory, which can be found in literary texts, conveys this foundation. The remembrance of the traumatic experience constructs narratives in which trauma and its impact on the formation of a new identity are considered to be major notions. The pattern of identity under the influence of trauma changes into a foundation that is constructed through the remembrance of the traumatic experience in the past rather than the utopia of the future. For Eyerman and Giesen, the new foundation of identity never develops aside from a representation of the past traumatic experience in the present [13], [14].

From what has been presented above, the current paper is built on the argument that trauma impacts the formation of a new identity which is characterized by resilience, survival and success. Two literary texts; namely, *Open City* by the Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole and *An Iraqi in Paris* by the Iraqi writer Samuel Shimon are to be analysed through comparative lens in an attempt to answer the question of whether trauma constructs a new resilient identity that relies on survival and success; or not.

Open City and *An Iraqi in Paris*: A Comparative Analysis

The Nigerian-American writer Teju Cole and the Iraqi Samuel Shimon come from two traumatic backgrounds. Cole was born into a Nigerian family who had to leave Nigeria to the United States of America due to civil war. Shimon, on the other hand, was born into an Iraqi Assyrian family in Iraq. The novelists’ countries are shaken by the trauma of subsequent wars, colonialism and slavery. Cole and Shimon are two expatriates who put trauma and identity in parallel through writing. The two writers also experience the formation of a new identity under the impact of the traumatic experience of war, slavery and displacement. Their novels present both trauma and identity in full contexts [15].

Cole’s novel *Open City* unfolds the story of the Nigerian-American psychiatrist Julius who embarks on a journey of exploring the buried trauma of slavery in New York City. On the other hand, *An Iraqi in Paris* narrates the story of the Iraqi Assyrian Shimon who leaves his country in an attempt to accomplish his dream to be a famous filmmaker in Hollywood, but he fails. Both novels are written to represent the two writers’ experience with trauma and identity transformation in expatriation.

Trauma meets Julius’s and Shimon’s identities in different territories. The psychiatrist’s African identity examines the traumatic losses of the past; which is the trauma of slavery in one territory in the present. In New York City, the voice of the African-American identity which has been traumatized for centuries echoes through the “excavated bodies [that] bore traces of suffering: blunt trauma, grievous bodily harm”. On the other hand, the Iraqi writer’s traumatized identity experiences traumatic losses, both in the past and the present, in more than one territory. The first encounter of trauma with Shimon’s identity occurs in Damascus where the Syrian National Security mistakes Shimon’s Assyrian identity for a Jewish spy due to his Assyrian name which Shimon’s mother considers as “a heavy name”. Shimon is, therefore, exposed to physical violence and is forced into a new name and a new identity.

Trauma still strikes Julius's identity in the same territory where he experiences the traumatic loss of his friend Mr. Bérard in New York City. The death of Julius's friend in the present triggers the traumatic loss of his brother in the past which takes place in New York City too. As Julius describes, "The loss of Mr. Bérard was like the loss of my own brother". Similarly, Shimon's identity experiences the traumatic death of his friend, but in a different territory which is Lebanon. François dies in an Israeli air raid on Beirut. In Lebanon, Shimon's Assyrian identity is also mistaken for a Jew, and therefore, he has to change into a Lebanese refugee.

The traumatic loss of Julius's identity as an African American genuinely surfaces through re-enacting the unacknowledged traumas of Africans in the United States. Julius's identity mourns the traumatic loss of his past fellows who sacrificed their lives for the people of New York City. Julius indicates that, "We lost so much, we were robbed at knifepoint, and when I think about Africans—and I know that we are not supposed to say such things in America about Africans, I want to spit". At the same time, he recalls the traumatic loss of his father in the homeland alongside other losses of friends due to diseases and accidents. On the other hand, the traumatic loss of the old identity becomes more evident with Shimon's movement from one identity into another. The loss of Shimon's old identity as an Iraqi Assyrian extends from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Egypt, Yemen where he gets a new Yemeni passport and a new identity, then settles in Europe. In Britain and France, Shimon's identity has to deal with the trauma of being a lost expatriate with a lost identity. He says, "Little by little I started to feel lost. I started to feel lost...and I could no longer sleep, so I started drinking a lot of alcohol". The twenty-eight-year-old Shimon has also to circumcise himself, and therefore, he cuts off the suspicious and imperial organ in his body. He becomes homeless in Paris and mourns the traumatic loss of his father in the homeland too.

Nevertheless, the traumatic experience of the identity loss results in an inevitable change in identity. The traumatic loss that both Julius and Shimon undergo enhance transformation and strength in their original identities. Julius's identity transforms into a resilient entity. It enriches the sense of belonging rather than separation. Julius maintains this fact by saying:

AFTER MY FATHER'S BURIAL, I WAS KEEN TO RETURN TO SCHOOL. I did not play the helpless orphan, had no time for it. A surprising number of my classmates had been through the same thing, losing parents to illness or accidents. One good friend had lost his dad in the executions that followed the failed military coup of 1976. He never spoke about it, but he wore it as a sort of badge of honor. What I wanted for myself that year was some sense of belonging, and loss paradoxically helped enrich that sense.

Likewise, Shimon's subsequent change of identity due to trauma functions as a mechanism of defence against trauma. Shimon ironically finds peace with the traumas of the past through the trauma of being homeless and lost in expatriation. He asserts such a fact by saying, "My first night as a homeless person in Paris. I felt an inner peace as if I was getting rid of the dirt of the past". The lost Iraqi Shimon, as his friends name him, postpones the pain of his traumatic experience as a refugee who loses and suffers on multiple levels. Shimon still shows resilience although his loss of faith in the hostland parallels his personal losses. Above the Concorde Bridge, the sad Assyrian found his lost language. He finds the language of the homeland which represents his Assyrian identity in the present. The restoration of the homeland identity helps the writer sustain the new identity which relies on transformation and resilience.

Julius's identity also renews its existence in the hostland as "In the spring, life came back into the earth's body".

The formation of the new identity of both Julius and Shimon develops through Sigmund Freud's defence mechanism of "introjection". Introjection, in brief, is a mechanism through which a living traumatized person internalizes with the dead in

order to relieve the pain of loss. Hence, the psychiatrist's traumatized identity develops through introjection. The new identity internalizes with the remembrance of the traumatic experience of slavery and the traumatic losses in the present as well. Julius affirms that:

His [Freud] writings on grief and loss, I found, remained useful. In *Mourning and Melancholia* and, later, in *The Ego and the Id*, Freud suggested that, in normal mourning, one internalizes the dead. The dead are fully assimilated into the living, a process he called introjection. In mourning that does not proceed normally, mourning in which something has gone wrong, this benign internalization does not happen. Instead, there's an incorporation. The dead occupy only a part of the one who has survived; they are sectioned off, hidden in a crypt, and from this place of encryption they haunt the living.

As Julius applies Freud's introjection to his traumatic experience, the internalization between the dead and the living, who have experienced trauma, suggests another internalization between the old identity and the new identity. It results in the assimilation of the old identity into the environment of the new identity which renews itself and brings its existence into a powerful identification. Similar to Julius, Shimon also uses introjection as a defence mechanism in order to create internalization between his old identity and the new identity through death and life. Shimon's colleague Mohammed experiences the traumatic death of his young brother. Though Mohammed shows an enmity towards Shimon's traumatized Christian identity, the trauma of death helps this identity assimilate into the environment where Mohammed and people alike exist. In fact, Shimon assimilates his Assyrian identity into the Muslim community through mourning Mohammed's brother. Like the assimilation of Shimon's Assyrian identity into the Muslim community in Iraq, his identity assimilates into exile.

In both cases, the assimilation of Julius's and Shimon's identities into the host society only does occur by the construction of new resilient identities that can cope with trauma. Shimon's and Julius's identities resemble the construction of a new identity that overcomes trauma and turns it into success. As Julius becomes a successful psychiatrist in America, Shimon becomes a famous writer for his only work *An Iraqi Paris*. However, this work immortalizes him as a global prominent writer. The characters Julius and Shimon are authentic manifestations for Cole and Shimon as two writers who carry two traumatized identities that survive trauma and transform it into success in expatriation.

4. Conclusion

The impact of trauma on the formation of a new identity has been an important subject not only in the field of Psychoanalysis, but in Literary Studies as well. The two literary texts analysed in this paper have shown such importance. Identity reshapes its existence within traumatic contexts and transforms the sense of loss into resilience and achievement. The paper has discussed the relation between trauma and identity and the development of the two concepts in the fields of Psychoanalysis and Literary Studies. It has also analysed the impact of the traumatic experience on the development of a new resilient identity towards survival and success throughout Cole's *Open City* and Shimon's *An Iraqi in Paris*. The analysis of the two literary texts has shown that the two texts share similarities and differences that indicate the construction of a new African-American identity and a new Iraqi Assyrian identity under the impact of trauma. The two writers transform their old identities which are shattered by the traumas of war, slavery and displacement into new resilient identities in exile. The two literary texts prove that the formation of the new identities occurs under the influence of trauma. Survival and success become the most prominent characteristics that shape these identities.

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