



Unburdening Post 9/11 Cultural Trauma in Amy Waldman's *The Submission***Abdul Rashid**

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Abstract

The incident of 9/11 is included among such incidents which created a paradigm shift in fiction. Initially, the incident of 9/11 was coded as culturally traumatic but later on fiction writers like Amy Waldman attempted to unburden the incident of 9/11 from its status of culturally traumatic. The present paper explores Waldman's understanding of recovery and inversion of the memory of the tragedy of 9/11 as a process of cultural trauma. For the thematic analysis, the major theoretical insights have been taken from Kerman (2017) concept of unburdening and J.C Alexander's (2012) theory of cultural trauma. We found that Waldman attempts to unburden all these labels of mis/representation by creating ambivalent identities. All the characters adopt the strategy of moving out of perpetuated and dominant national discourse. Asma Anwar shakes the general mis/understanding of the Americans towards the Muslims. She redefines the negatively perceived identities of the Muslims in America and suggests a transcultural understanding for human rights and humanity. We found that ambivalence and social flexibility in the Post 9/11 social scene of America is a healing gesture in response to the incident of 9/11.

Key Words: Unburdening, Post 9/11 Fiction, Cultural Trauma, Trauma Carriers.

Introduction

Since the incident of 9/11, the atrocities of war and cultural trauma have emerged as the most pressing theme in Post 9/11 fiction. Cultural trauma is usually considered as a socially mediated power structure. In the construction of cultural trauma, the social agents determine which events are to be forgotten, which are to be remembered for a long time. Events are not tragic in their happening, but they are assigned the meaning to be painful from the social agents of meaning making. A sense of painful injury is associated with some catastrophic social event while some tragedies are not labeled as tragic and painful. The meanings of tragic incident are more dependent on the social agents of meaning making (Alexander, 2004). In the construction of this process- cultural trauma, the social agents act



as catalyst and carrier groups. Alexander takes the construction of cultural trauma as a process. The end of this process is to move from conflicted situation to recovery and routinization. In post 9/11 times, there were two different approaches which were emphasized by the fiction writers as a response to the codification of the incident of 9/11. The representative fiction writers who coded the incident of 9/11 as culturally traumatic and negatively represented the identity of the Muslims include Don DeLillo. Such fiction writers were truer to the political will of America who demanded war against the perpetrators of the tragedy. But later, another category of the Post 9/11 fiction developed with a tendency of negotiating this enigma by an attempt of unburdening the situation of cultural trauma. This category of Post 9/11 fiction called for the construction of a “third space” where America and the perpetrators might see the cross-cultural suffering. The fiction writers proposed a demand of inclusive identities by developing the tendency that the world can move on from a conflicted situation of cultural trauma. This category of fiction showed alternative image of the Muslim character. In these works, the Muslim characters have been represented as the victim of cultural trauma as well. There are also a lot of novels which have dealt with the psychic and domestic trauma of the victims. Here, we must keep in mind this tendency was not apparent soon after the incident of 9/11. We see in the fiction selected for the present study, the authors have created a drive to look the sufferings of people beyond the American perceived sense of humanity by the politicians and media.

The Post 9/11 fiction raised the massive consciousness to rebuilt loss which the world must bear in consequences of cultural trauma. Both American and Non-American writers have responded to the complexities and many ramifications of 9/11 in a variety of ways, ranging from poems and plays to non-fiction. Yet, the most remarkable literary explorations are encountered in novelistic form, as approaches range. By form and approach of novel as a genre as the most suitable medium, we mean novel has wide range of characters and a capacity to see the things and themes on the wider canvas. Unfortunately, the researchers have not provided such a study which is fully dedicated to closely analyze the way the post 9/11 fiction portrays cultural trauma in Post 9/11 fiction. The researchers’ approach is differentiated on account of healing and re-negotiating perspectives which has not been explored in Post 9/11 fiction.

For addressing the idea of terrorism and its consequences, critics have not focused on how the Post 9/11 fiction has redrawn the image of Islam, especially in terms of how this



change has had measurable consequences on the identity and lives of the moderate Muslims living in the West. The Muslim characters have become nothing more than a repeated version of the stereotypical image of the Post 9/11 cultural world. It focuses on how the post 9/11 American fiction writers attempt to challenge the familiar pre-occupations in post 9/11 fiction. With these objectives and preoccupations, we focus on the significant category of post 9/11 fiction which has not sufficiently been explored in the literary and critical landscapes. Thus, the question of inversion of cultural memory for routinization and discourse of normalcy attempted by fiction writers in Post 9/11 times finds its legitimacy to social relevance in literature. The present study is an attempt to explore Post 9/11 fiction as a medium of articulating against the atrocities of culturally traumatic bounds and creation of a third space for harmony by the fiction writers from America. Now, we see how Post 9/11 fiction emerged as a voice for critical justice by discourse of normalization. Baelo-Allué (2016) in her study *From the Traumatic to the Political: Cultural Trauma, 9/11 and Amy Waldman* suggested that the incident of 9/11 was coded as culturally traumatic and later as political one. But unfortunately, her study could not investigate the process of recovery, inversion of memory of the tragedy and a move for routinization which is the end the process of cultural trauma and the same had been emphasized in the novel *The Submission*.

The present study aims to explore how Waldman's characters in the novel *The Submission* move out of the situation of cultural trauma. In this sense, this study is an extension of the study of Baelo-Allue and to look at a new perspective of cultural trauma in line with recovery and routinization. Baelo-Allue study is more restrictive and reductive one as she could not talk about the significant aspect of unburdening and routinization which is a significant step towards the process of cultural trauma.

Literature Review

Alexander (2004) defines cultural trauma as a situation in which any catastrophic event affects the collective consciousness of a group at large leaving indelible marks upon the unconsciousness of the group. The catastrophic events mark the memories of the group for a long time and change the identity of the group in irrevocable and fundamental ways. According to Alexander, the events in themselves are not traumatic but they are made traumatic by the social agents of meaning making. It is totally dependent on the will of social agents to determine which event qualifies as culturally traumatic. The consciousness of the group acts as catalyst of meaning making and tags the event as traumatic. "Cultural trauma is



a state of fright, fear and chaos at social level. So, as the meanings are socially mediated that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events themselves” (Alexander, 2004, p. 10) The effects of such catastrophic events are prolonged and widespread, and include intense cultural upheaval, a collective loss of security, damaged, ruptured and altered identities, a situation of terror and fear in the community at large and physical injuries and the death. So, the situation of cultural trauma threatens, alters, and ultimately destabilizes the sociocultural process of peaceful existence which has been in action prior to the happening of any culturally traumatic event. Alexander is interested in the role played by certain carrier groups which label certain events as traumatic and long lasting even after the happening of the events. By this we can establish that cultural trauma is more a conscious tact, and it also acts “matter of intense cultural and political work,” in which “narrative wins out is a matter of performative power” (Smelser, 2004, p. 264)

In simple terms, we see that defining the meaning of any event as culturally traumatic is totally dependent on the social agents, how do they designate meaning to any catastrophic event. These meaning of being culturally traumatic are determined by politicians, film producers and artists, which are a smaller section of the community, but the tragedy associated with the event is felt by the whole group of the community. If we take the example of Holocaust, it was tragic for the direct victims of the tragedy but once it was labeled as culturally traumatic, it was felt traumatic beyond the borders or geographical location.

LaCapra (2014) identifies that every society has its inherited trauma which acts in that society like a myth. If we trace the origin of trauma in western society, Old Testament provides the trauma originating from original sin and exile from the happy fields of Eden. Similarly, the New Testament, presents the trauma out of the Christ's crucifixion. If we talk of the Jewish community in the West, it takes Holocaust as a founding event of trauma. Similarly, the American Revolution, slavery and civil war had been the experiences of disruption and trauma in the American history. The massive killing during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, qualifies the partition as an event of cultural trauma. So, we see every society has a collective sense of trauma in it. The context of such traumatic events may be both religious and social ones. For example, holocaust as a culturally traumatic event includes both religious and political sentiments. In post 9/11 times, it was taken that every good man in the world is obliged to have a sense of trauma of 9/11. Kellner (2004) opines that in coding and framing 9/11 in the language of trauma, media constructed a troop of



conflicting discourse. Such conflicting discourse divided the world in the binary of “us vs. them”.

Theoretical Formulations

Alexander (2013) in his seminal work *Trauma: A social theory* has proposed cultural trauma is a constant process of meaning making. In this process the social agents are actively involved which determine that which incident is to be taken as culturally traumatic? Artists, fiction writers, film makers and politicians are included in such social agents of meaning making. In this process of construction of any event as culturally traumatic, there happens a moment of calming down. In calming down period, the social agents attempt to reverse the memory of the tragic event. This reversal of the memory moves the victims of the tragedy towards routinization and recovery in cultural and social domains. The role of the meaning making agents in the reversal of the memory of the tragedy, recovery of the victims from cultural trauma and routinization is as important as it is in the construction of any tragic event as culturally traumatic. Similarly, Kerman (2017) takes such process as a process of unburdening. He contends that unburdening is the relative freedom in professional endeavors without contextualizing race, ethnicity, gender, cultural trauma, or any other burden of representation. Having achieved these measures of enduring *separateness* is the outcome of art and fiction. For the analysis of the data, the researchers have used the theoretical insights of Alexander (2013).

Textual Analysis

The Submission is a fictional story set in New York. A jury is held to decide the winner of architectural design for the memorial of the dead ones of the 9/11. Claire Burwell as a jury member tries to persuade other jury members to vote for the Garden as a symbol of memorials of 9/11. In the meantime, Ariana Montagu, an artist from New York, is convincing for a structure named the Void which is huge and gloomy in appearance. Claire considers that Ariana recognizes the designer of the Void, hence blames Ariana as being biased. Paul Rubin is the chairman of the jury. He is a retired investment banker and appreciates the arts. Paul shows more respect to Claire than Ariana. However, Paul refuses to declare any of these designs as the winner unless there is a tie. Claire then follows Maria, an art curator and fellow juror, to persuade her to vote for the Garden. While attempting to persuade Maria, we learn that Claire lost her husband in the attacks on Twin Towers and since then she had been treated as a poster for the widows of 9/11. She successfully convinces Maria to vote for the



Garden. Ultimately, the garden as a design for the memorial of 9/11 is declared as a winning design by Muhammad Khan who is an American Muslim. This news irritates jury members that the winner is a Muslim. The story continues from here, extending the decision whether to award Mo the winning bid or not. Asma continues to value the death of her husband. But she is murdered by an unidentified person while on her way back to Bangladesh. Prior to her death she was disillusioned from claimed values of America as a land of free and unbiased people. With her death on the pavement all the characters resolve their triggered stances and yearn for the establishment of a unified social structure in American society.

Alexander (2013) considers that cultural trauma is constructed through the social agents' i.e., Political leaders, artists, and fiction writers. While these constructions can be renegotiated through those who are responsible for such social constructs. Waldman attempts to unburden these constructions of cultural trauma in her novel. Keeble (2014) takes the novel *The Submission* as a pen picture of the social situation of post-9/11 rhetoric of perplexity on the emotional and socio-political level. Furthermore, he takes Waldman's idea of ambivalent identities as a way forward to healing signs of society. These identities act not in simplistic binaries but as representation of refined, indecisive, and perplexed feelings. Waldman dramatizes the subject of the memorial design of 9/11. She personifies what Kaplan (2005) considers that there is an intricate relationship of individual and trauma constructed culturally. For example, initially, Claire and Ariana as members of the jury are taken as representative of two contradictory and competing spectrums. The first one- Claire is the representative of the psychic trauma as she has personally faced the loss of the death of her husband in the attacks of 9/11. The second one-Ariana represents the trauma of someone who has witnessed these attacks from a great distance (Ariana is not a direct victim of 9/11). As compared to other jury members, Claire deliberates herself distinctive on the following ground that they'd all lost, of course — lost the sense that their nation was vulnerable; lost their city's most recognizable icons; maybe lost friends or acquaintances. But she had also lost her husband (Waldman, 2011, p. 3). But despite being the direct victim of the tragedy of the 9/11 she is working the recovery of coming out the situation which was taken as culturally traumatic.

Ariana symbolizes the sense of collective victimhood. She extends herself as a representative of the whole nation. Despite of not sharing any proximate ties with those who were direct victims of the attacks, people like Ariana claim for very strict actions against



supposed perpetrators i.e., the Muslims. Ariana speaks out the political consciousness of America which aroused in response to the incident of 9/11. Waldman through the character of Claire counterbalances American injured sense of collective identity. Claire despite being the direct victim of 9/11 prefers the design of “Garden to Void” as a symbol of moving beyond national response to the incident of 9/11. Thus, Claire provides the alternate lens to the cultural trauma constructed massively by political leaders and media. On this ground, Claire defines Ariana with inconsistent impact- feeling serious what is not personal. Ariana acts as a character of cultural or mass consciousness. On a political level, culturally constructed trauma divided the American nation into diverse poles. The Americans had to go from a serious loss which was not their personal rather national and was invented one.

Bold (2002) argued that public ceremonies generally act as dominant account of narrative for massive social devastation. Waldman points out that the private and public responses towards the incident of 9/11 were different. Private responses delineated with the passage of time. While shattered sense of collectivity repairs with great difficulties. In case of America, it is still consistent. It led to the formation of Islamophobia. In the novel *The Submission*, it seems that the victims of psychic trauma including Claire and Asama have overcome their sense of loss. Both were the direct victim of the attacks on the twin towers of New York. Both had lost their husbands in these attacks. Waldman establishes that creating harmonization between individual and collective memory of loss is a tough exertion and prevents outcomes or solutions. At one time, the character of Paul tempts the readers as representative of identity constructed at mass level. Concurrently, he vanguards the sense of multiplicity, that is not limited to the traumatized victim.

Asma's dilemma throughout the novel is to redefine the position of husband's death and honor, in a culture which completely denies the claim of their existence: “How could you be dead if you did not exist?” Asma in fact is the only character in the novel who takes a firm and unwavering stand for her injured sense of identity. Initially, she appears as a representative of those being on the margins without being the part of collective consciousness of that culture because of her illegal immigrant position. While the later part of the novel represents alternate sense of injured collectivity. She is in fact the one who presents the position of minorities against the master narrative of cultural trauma created by social carrier groups of America i.e., media and political leaders. She claims that her choice for garden is appropriate. She takes the Muslims and American as the people of same social



thread as they have grown up on the same soil. She projects that it is difficult to differentiate between the national values segregating the American Muslims and the Americans.

Mohammad is ambiguous on the dual stances of his identity. He starts splitting his identity. He initiates creating distance between his present position and Mo as he has been treated and talked in media. On media talks, he has been taken as being among the perpetrators of the incident of 9/11. He says that the facts are not as they have been presented by media and the jury members. He takes himself as a stranger and questions his invented identity. He trains himself to the facts as he is being treated by the Americans in public and social spheres. American society adds traumatic experiences for Mohammad. Furthermore, in the novel the other Muslim characters also face threats from the American society. It becomes incidents of violence against the Muslim women. Moreover, the analysis reveals that Muslim sections of American society in response to the prevailing situation of chaos and violence also turned violent. The situation of Muslim women was more deplorable as compared to the Muslim men in parallel. Asma, after the death of her husband in the attack on world trade center, is publically threatened by American bands searching for the Muslims as perpetrators of the incident of 9/11. In this augmented situation of violence, a group of Bangladeshi boys carrying sticks with the intention to beat anyone coming close to her (Waldman, p. 218). Waldman resists against the ongoing of such social violence. It reveals that after the incident of 9/11, America faced situation of social upheavals with violent ends. Asma being in state of mental loss and social ambiguity questions “[s]he no longer knew who was imprisoning her, only that the prison was well sealed” (Waldman, p. 219).

Asma as representative of the third world the Muslim woman takes the challenge to define the Muslims’ stance and speak for them. She says that there are not only the American who lost their lives in the attack on twin towers in New York, but the Muslims and other minorities equally suffered the tragedy of 9/11. As the Muslims are among these sufferers, how they can be the perpetrators of these attacks. Similarly, if the Muslims can be the victim of these sufferings, the Americans have no ethical rational to put a question mark on the loyalties of the Muslims.

The character of Asma since its emergence in the novel provokes as serious counterbalance to the American perceived understanding against the Muslims. Thus, she stresses that my husband on account of being Muslim was a man who never hurt anyone. At the same time, the Americans should not confuse the loyalties of the Muslims in America



with their immersed national rigidities. Waldman through the story of Asma provides the counter narrative to the stance of the American society. This counter narrative of Asma continues even after finding her voice and declaration of her experiences openly.

Asma develops a strong desire that it is better for her to be deported to her homeland-Bangladesh, rather to live in such deplorable situation of dehumanizing alienation. She senses the situation gravely and decides that she is unable to stay more in such a land which could not understand the value for her husband's death. On her way to Bangladesh, she comes across a lot of people who were moving to their homeland in view of the prevailing chaotic situation aroused in response to the construction of cultural trauma. However, an anonymous person makes use of the chaos and stabs Asma. She gives her life on the pavement. Her murderer remains unidentified, and the case remains unsolved. The death of Asma put to end all the conflicts which were holding the characters at divergent social poles. This traumatized situation ends in resolution. In the end of the novel, the characters of the novel apologize for their actions. Muhammad Khan leaves American and withdraws himself from the competition of architectural design in memory of the dead ones of the incident of 9/11. By the end of novel, Mo is questioned about the memorial design by Molly who a documentary maker and William is his camera man. Molly considers that "the process of creating a memorial [is] itself part of the memorial and she wants to revisit the process and the people involved in the process to see how they think about the memorial design twenty years later (Waldman, p. 368). Mohammad responded that America "had moved on, self-corrected, as it always did, that feverish time mostly forgotten". By this, Waldman implies that American had come out of the debacles consciously constructed by social carrier groups. The characters of the novel as victims of cultural trauma solidify the burden of their identities.

Conclusion

In the light of the analyzed data, it is concluded that the incident of 9/11 was coded as culturally traumatic but Amy Waldman in her novel emphasized on the unburdening of such cultural trauma. Waldman through the character of Claire suggests to the American political and social stake holders that to remember the dead ones of the 9/11 it is not necessary that we should create a social situation of horror and chaos. The analysis also reveals that ambivalence and social flexibility in America as projected in the novel is a healing gesture in response to the incident of 9/11. Waldman admits that the collective identity of the Americans was threatened by the incident of 9/11, but it is the right time to develop



multicultural understandings. Still sticking to these grievances is not wise. Waldman seems to project such a social space in the American society that it should be capable of adhering diversity of the individual and collective issues in different domains. The unburdening of post 9/11 cultural trauma is the need of the hour. It is high time to come out of the rigid national identity and repair the historical ruptures. Waldman attempts to erase the collective consciousness of the Americans in this novel.

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