

CONNECTION AS A WAY TO COMBAT TRAUMA IN NADEEM ASLAM'S *THE WASTED VIGIL*

Aisha Ali

Department of English,
University of Lucknow, Lucknow.

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to study the effects of trauma and the healing effects of connection with other human beings in order to lead a wholesome, healthy life. Trauma has a way of disorienting the individual from his circumstances, especially the event of trauma, and his family and friends. It creates a distance between the individual and the life that he once lived as the previous beliefs and trust are shattered and relationships are lost. This study looks at how the characters in the novel *The Wasted Vigil* are all going through some form of trauma: some are victims of childhood neglect and abuse, some have lost their close relatives to violence, and some are victims of barbarity of the local warlords. The cause of suffering differs yet the common healing they all are in need of is creating and developing relationships with other sufferers so as to be healed by their humanness and vulnerability. As such, there are many methods to relieve oneself from the pain but the author suggests that in times of crisis and lack of proper support of immediate family, one can construct new trustworthy connections and release the bottled-up emotions. The paper includes references from interpersonal psychology and contemporary researches in this area. These findings help to understand that the formation and maintenance of healthy relations is crucial for physical and mental growth of people.

Keywords: Trauma, Healing, Relationships, Interpersonal Psychology, Abuse, Connection.

“Human beings have a natural and innate need to bond. And when we're happy and healthy we'll bond and connect with each other.” (Hari, Johann. *Chasing the Scream*. Bloomsbury USA, 2015)

According to Cambridge English Dictionary, the word “trauma” means two things: a) “an injury (such as a wound) to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent” and b) “a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury”. The origin of the term can be found in Greek language, where it meant “a wound, a hurt, a defeat”. In this paper, only the second meaning of the word will be referred to.

Human being is a part of a larger system, his existence is not isolated or detached from the larger social systems—the family, the community, and the universe. Considering this idea which was actually formulated by Alfred Adler, there are three important life tasks: occupation, love and sex, and our relationship with other people—all social challenges. How we respond to our primary social arrangement—our family—may develop into the prototype of our perspective toward life. All human beings have an inherent capacity to learn skills for living in a harmonious manner with others in the society. This is a natural tendency to socially connect which has to be nurtured consciously. The feeling of security and belonging is a human need and is deeply embedded within the human social evolution process. Taking interest in social affairs and feeling leads to social improvement which entails living authentically and not only conforming with pre-existing ideals. It must be open to changes through cultural resistance or rebellion.

Aslam's novel centers around people who come from diverse backgrounds and assemble in a house in Afghanistan. An unlikely family comes into formation as each of the characters carry an emotional baggage which is a result of the war and violence in different parts of the world. Each of them do eventually learn to heal their traumas from the stories and lessons of others, which will provide a solace

and closure to their own pain. People of totally different worldviews collect here seeking sanctuary, aid and answers: Lara, a Russian Christian art historian trying to find her brother, a Soviet soldier; David, a CIA agent and Zameen's lover, desperate to discover who caused her death twenty years before; Casa, a young Afghan trained in jihadi camps and injured on a covert operation; and Dunia, a schoolteacher. They make 'links out of separations', or a 'kinship of wounds' while power struggles rage between rival Taliban- and American-backed warlords (Aslam 2008: 87; 430).

Trauma exists in many forms, and as Herman (1997) notes, may range "from the effects of a single overwhelming event that generally involve a threat to life or a close personal encounter with violence and death" (p. 33) to the "more complicated effects of prolonged and repeated abuse" (p. 3). According to Herman (1997), the effects of trauma are quite similar on the human brain, hence the steps in its treatment and recovery too are alike (i.e., "establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community" (p. 3)). Many people with anxiety that comes with trauma have "feelings of inadequacy and inferiority...[which] constitute the primary reason the person is sure that they cannot cope with a given situation" (p. 49). As Aslam tells about Casa in the novel:

"By the time he was about ten he had endured every kind of assault on his body by men or stronger boys, and—the only way to feel any control was to distress or wound others—by the time he was about fourteen he had done the same to younger or weaker boys. At the very core of him was the belief that human beings had little to offer beyond cruelty and danger." (221)

A person will try to manage his anxiety through various methods. The most common of them is to withdraw from others and keep distance (both emotional and physical) from others in spite of their desire to belong (Hjertaas, 2009; Reed, 2016). As we are told about Laura in the novel:

"She had only a handful of memories until she came to Marcus's house. Over the months she had just stepped away from everyone, coming back to St Petersburg from Moscow, where she had moved on marrying Stepan. She desired no real communication with anyone, entire days going by without her speaking to even one person." (140)

As Bessel van der Kolk (2014) states, "after trauma the world is experienced through a different nervous system" (p. 53). Because the effects of trauma adversely affect so many aspects of an individual's physiology, "it is critical for trauma treatment to engage the entire organism, body, mind and brain" (p. 53). Healing trauma through a model of presence and connection focuses on the person's "wholeness". In recent times, interest in healing trauma has spiked all over the world and research is being conducted to seek holistic modalities for the purpose. New kinds of therapies and interventions are rapidly being developed as new information from research in neuroscience and the plasticity of the brain emerges.

Griffith and Powers (2007) outline the three "unavoidable" tasks as observed by Adler. Adler saw them as "three problems [that] are irrevocably set before every individual" (p. 64). They are (1) "the social task of living as one amongst others; (2) "the work task" and that living on earth "made possible by the work of others, demands that we offer something in exchange" and (3) "the love task" in that "each human being...must meet the challenge of sexual cooperation, on which depends the future of humanity" (p. 64). Rudolf Dreikurs and Harold Mosak, of the Alfred Institute of Chicago, proposed two additional life tasks: (4) the fourth life task which is that an individual is "required to get along with himself, how to deal with himself" (Griffith & Powers, p. 21-22) and (5) the fifth life task, which is "the need to adjust to the problems beyond the mere existence on this earth and to find meaning in our lives, to realize significance of human existence through transcendental and spiritual involvement". (p. 22). The underlying principle here is that through the bond of a caregiver, an individual develops the ability to regulate their emotions, particularly when in emotional distress. An individual's attachment style refers to the characteristic ways in which they operate within, and relate to, their caregivers. (Levy et al., 2011)

Adler (1969) maintained that “social feeling is actually a cosmic feeling...which lives in us, which we cannot dismiss entirely and which gives us ability to empathize with things which lie outside the body” (p. 73). Trauma can disconnect a person from their love relationships and family members, as well as their own skills and gifts that enables the “work” they do. That is how one of the main criteria of healing from trauma is a feeling of connection with fellow humans and a willingness to grow and develop oneself and to help others in some way. When these necessities do not get the attention they deserve, a person may deem himself inferior and unworthy. As a result, the individual may resort to berating himself emotionally and lose connection with himself as well as others. The feeling of fulfilment occurs when the wish to connect and contribute are stronger. Therefore, what many therapists do is establish a support system for the one who has suffered trauma as soon as possible. Social supports and relationships acts as shield against traumatic stress. Many trauma survivors may themselves rely on family members or friends, but some may avoid any such help since they believe that others may fail to give an appropriate response to their suffering.

Survivors may further maintain a distance from people to avoid embarrassing themselves with their sudden reaction to stress. Many people develop distrust in their friends and relatives after being betrayed by a person they were closely related to. Still, the formation of supportive connections is a significant antidote in the recovery from traumatic stress. Trauma victims feel grief-stricken, depressed, anxious, guilty and angry after experiencing trauma. They may lose connection with the people around them and may become reclusive. Basically, victims feel helpless and not being able to control the consequences that follow this painful experience. They may even develop physical symptoms such as headaches, muscular aches and pains, diarrhoea, nausea and palpitations, as well as insomnia, irritability, poor concentration, being ‘on guard’ most all the time (hyper-vigilance which may approach the intensity of paranoid suspiciousness), and increased startle responses.

Connection is the experience of oneness. It’s having shared experiences, relatable feelings, or similar ideas. As Johann Hari says in his book: “The opposite of addiction, is not sobriety, it is connection”. The foremost contributor to happiness is a sense of belonging and purpose. It has been noted that cultures that are more communal in nature are more mentally healthy as a whole. People who have very less social connections often die earlier. Human beings are a tribal species. Many individualistic cultures may want us to think otherwise but there is no healthy existence possible for a human being while being isolated from other human beings. No person can exist in complete isolation. We do not just prefer healthy relationships; we need them. Connection is very important, but it is generally overlooked and no effort is made to learn and teach people skills to foster real connection.

What has emerged from studies in interpersonal psychology is that humans have a fundamental need to connect with others and this need is linked to our mental health. Similarly, researches in interpersonal neurobiology have suggested in scientific terms that human emotions, relationships and health are inherently connected with one another. Trauma often challenges the emotional and mental safety of an individual. He may see himself highly vulnerable and in this situation the genuine care and connections with family and friends can act as a reliever of traumatic stress.

“I wish I didn’t feel alone all the time,’ he says at last very quietly...
 “Sometimes nothing makes sense and I become afraid,’ he says.
 ‘There’s no need for you to feel alone’
 ‘There are so many questions.’
 ‘Those questions are being asked by everyone. You have no need to feel alone.’”

For those who lacked good relations with other people may have to build new, trustworthy bonds to feel a sense of safety. This may not be an easy task but building a relationship where the survivor feels safe and heard can be a boost for the healing. When we can address stress in a soothing manner and feel actively supported by our community in responding to a crisis, we are able to regulate our emotions in a healthy manner. When Casa catches sight of Lara in Marcus’s house, he is surprised at the rush of

emotions inside of himself. He sees all the possible relations he could have with the woman of this age and could enjoy the love and care that arose from that:

“A wish in him to prolong the tenderness he is suddenly experiencing in his breast. A mother. An aunt or older sister or cousin. He tears himself away from the comfort at last...” (235)

To conclude, Aslam has suggested that emotions are meant to be felt so as to experience real comfort and ease. The way communities exist together ensures healthy survival and growth of all individuals. Trustworthy connections also help in combating psychological problems as well as social problems of addiction.

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