



REVISITING TRAUMA: MEMORY AND SELF- DISCOVERY IN RUTH WARE'S *IN A DARK, DARK WOOD*

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Abstract: The paper dissects the psychological mechanism of suppressed memories, highlighting the debilitating effects of trauma, including emotional upheaval and dissociative tendencies. This paper delves into the intricate psyche of Leonora Shaw, the protagonist of Ruth Ware's *In a Dark, Dark Wood*, examining the profound and enduring impact of past trauma on her present life. Through the lens of trauma theory, the analysis explores Leonora's decade-long struggle to reconcile with a horrific event from her adolescence. Ultimately, the paper illuminates how these deeply buried memories resurface and disrupt Leonora's present, underscoring the insidious nature of trauma and its capacity to shape an individual's life trajectory.

Index Terms – trauma, denial, reluctance, healing.

Introduction

Trauma in Greek means 'wounds', or an injury inflicted on a body. The word 'trauma' has a particular definition that is depicted as a profound experience characterized by an unprecedented and severe manifestation of hallucinations and intrusive phenomena. Psychological trauma is discernible through a wide spectrum of physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral indicators. These manifestations are often presented as profound fear, helplessness, and isolation, fundamentally disrupting an individual's sense of control, interpersonal connections, and existential meaning. Therefore, it is clear that trauma is not about an ailment or an ordinary problem occurring because of certain unhealed wounds. It is a story behind an event that screams out to describe reality and a truth that would not have been possible to understand in other ways. The truth, in reality, is hidden in the form of actions and languages.

There may be a variation in the manifestation of trauma where an individual may escape an accident or an event and may not have encountered harm yet that individual may face a recurrence of the event. However, there can be any specific traumatic element or various elements felt by an individual after facing a traumatic event. The feeling of the after-effect of trauma and identifying the element may vary from one individual to another individual. There is a distinct term that is "traumatic neurosis" indicating a psychological state of mind within an individual to depict the different psychological disturbances due to an immense emotional shock. The impact of external violence on psychological problems has been shown by disciplines like neurobiology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry. Thus, it can be stated that there is a psychological issue which resides in an individual because of a specific event.

Trauma studies developed in 1990s and have been dependent on the Freudian theory where the trauma model imagines the experiences of an extreme event. The trauma model states that suffering has always been unrepresentable yet the elements of the traumatic experiences can be identified. The Pluralistic Trauma Theory defies the Caruthian model, which believes trauma is an intractable unconscious dilemma, underscoring the inherent indeterminacy of language and the difficulty in representing extreme experiences within literary texts. This theory states that structural dimensions within trauma develop dissociative effects based on consciousness

as well as memory. Marilyn Charles in *Working with Trauma: Lessons from Bion and Lacan* has focused on certain ideas on clinical applicability of Lacan. Both Freud and Lacan have caused a delay in the “return of the repressed” and hence there is an absence of mourning and continuous recurrence of the trauma. The idea that trauma cannot be fully understood or expressed through the symbolic order is central to Lacanian thought. Lacan states that trauma causes a person's symbolic register to become disrupted, which in turn causes a fragmentation inside the psyche.

This study examines Ruth Ware's novel *In a Dark, Dark Wood* through the lens of Pluralistic Model of Trauma. The Pluralistic model suggests that traumatic experiences reveal new connections between experience, language, and knowledge, emphasizing the social importance of trauma. This approach of studying trauma pays closer attention to the diverse ways in which trauma is represented. Ruth Ware (b 1977) is a British author renowned for her psychological crime thrillers. She is also known for suspenseful and twisty plots. Like many of Ware's novels, *In a Dark, Dark Wood* is a thriller filled with adventure and detective fiction elements. It portrays the life of Leonora Shaw, who had a quiet, isolated, and contented life in her London apartment. One day, she unexpectedly receives an invitation to her friend's hen party. The event was to be held in a beautiful glass house, which was a picturesque English country house. She was taken aback and deeply surprised to receive an invitation from this friend, especially since they have not stayed in touch for such a long time. The invitation brought her past back to life, bringing unpleasant memories she had been avoiding, these recollections had been haunting her like a ghost and she said, “Flo's words hung in the air like an echo, niggling at me. I don't know what happened. It sounded like a plaintive child. No, I thought bitterly. You don't. So don't go prying into my past” (Ware 11). These words make her anxious thoughts seem very clear to the readers and conspicuously depict her trauma.

Leonora was very reluctant to attend the hen party of her childhood best friend so much so that she seemed very hesitant about replying back to the invitation and thought Clare to be a part of her past which she had always wanted to stay in the past. Leonora had associated all her traumatic experiences with her past friendships, leading those relationships to serve as reminders of the distressing incident. Consequently, she compartmentalized her past and distanced herself from those memories and friends. Her profound reluctance to narrate or even acknowledge the event signifies her deep-seated denial of its occurrence. It made her very uneasy to think that her being pregnant with James' child was the cause for the termination of their relationship. It was very hard for her to accept that James broke up with her over a text and left her alone in the most vulnerable situation she had ever dealt with. Indeed, she was not hesitant to meet Clare but to re-live repressed event, which would exacerbate the pain she had already been dealing with. If she would meet Clare and her other old friends, she implicitly said that the event was resolutely a part of the past and she wanted that part to stay there. Even after ten years of that event she still didn't seem to come to terms with that and had not disclosed all parts of that event to anyone which had been bothering her for such a long time.

Despite her initial decision to attend the party, she remained hesitant, questioning her choice. The event itself doesn't seem significant enough to merit such intense deliberation, which suggests her trauma is resurfacing. This is further evidenced by her explicit remarks on the matter, “I ran longer routes, trying to make myself as tired as possible when I went to bed, but as soon as my head hit the pillow, the whispers started. Ten years. After everything that happened was this a huge mistake?” (17) After spending ten years in latency the symptoms of trauma started surfacing, in Freudian terms, the “latency period” refers to the phase during which the effects of the past experiences remain latent and are not outwardly visible. However, the onset of symptoms indicate that these latent effects are now appearing. Consequently, she found herself unable to focus on anything other than the reawakened traumatic event. “Traumatic neurosis” in words of Freud is “unlike the symptoms of normal neurosis, whose painful manifestations can be understood ultimately in terms of the attempted avoidance of unpleasurable conflict, the painful repetition of the flashback to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning in any way” (Caruth 72).

After her arrival at the glass house she had no way of going back to her place and she completely came to the realization that how big a mistake she had made by attending the party. The glass house in the novel is more than just a physical structure; it reveals a deeper meaning embedded in the story. It symbolizes the trauma that Leonora has been harboring in her mind. The woods encircling the house represent the internal chaos of someone experiencing trauma. This combination of the transparent glass house and the chaotic woods creates a paradox. The glass signifies clarity, while the woods stand for disorder, mirroring the protagonist's life. She recalls her memories with the same clarity as the glass, yet her life is as turbulent as the woods surrounding the house. The way Leonora expressed her experience in the glass-house party makes it clear that she had come to the realization of her not being able to escape her past memories which she had been avoiding. “As the door opened, I saw a flash of bright blonde hair, and I had a moment of complete panic. This was a

mistake I should never have come, but it was too late to turn back” (21). Trauma emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind.

She incessantly kept thinking about the decision which she had made – that was going to the glass house where the hen party was to be held. She said, “Why am I here? I thought again, with a kind of agony this time. Why did I come?” (46). Her words make it very apparent that this is causing agitation in her mind. She was so overwhelmed with the baggage that she had been pretending was never there. The sadness of her best friend marrying none other than but her childhood lover, whom she was unable to get over with because she had not got the closure yet. She also did not give any name to the pain which she thought he inflicted upon her which had taken the form of trauma. She was also shocked by their relationship that she couldn't hide her emotions and the old pain confronted her on which she said, “something was building inside me like a scream. But I said nothing. I pushed it back down. James? Clare and James?” (49). It was extremely hard for her to accept that her childhood sweetheart who supposedly gave her painful traumatic memories which she had not been vocal about – the memories which came to traumatize her every now and then. These memories were ignited by this recent event and brought previously repressed event to the fore. This process of reminiscing the past conflict inflicted psychological pain on her psyche and at the same time ascribing the value of previously repressed experience in the unconscious. She was thinking about James obsessively when swirling the drink in her glass and pondering about James being her lover in school. This was testimony to the idea of her being in trauma which she had been trying to avoid. This agonizing memory, referred to as a “pathogenic reminiscence”, involved the act of recalling an event that induces psychological pain, while simultaneously attributing significance to an experience that was previously repressed within the unconscious mind.

Even after her trauma had come to light, she still found herself unable to vocalize it, not even to her closest friend Nina. Her silence stems directly from the trauma, which has caused her to dissociate from her emotions. Dissociation is a mental disorder that involves experiencing a disconnection and lack of continuity between thoughts, memories, surroundings, actions, and identity. People with dissociative disorder escape reality in a way that are involuntary and unhealthy causing problems with functioning in everyday life. And there can be noticed exactly the same actions in the behavior of Leonora when she faced another trauma after a car accident which she apparently survived with her friends but James died. After the accident she lost her memory of the accident and her doctor encouraged her to think about the event “well, this is not my speciality you understand – I work physical head trauma. But sometimes the brain suppresses events that we are not quite ready to deal with. I suppose it's a ... coping mechanism” (193). The doctor explained to her the chaos she had been feeling inside her mind which in a way made her feel little better but still unable to express. Here we understand the severity of her trauma which she had been battling and found herself unable to vocalize- the intense feelings of her traumatic past.

Leonora was going through dilemma, pain, and perplexity about the feelings she couldn't give psychic meanings to. She could only recall fragmented memories of traumatic experiences, which induced unavoidable psychological conflict and emotional distress. The catastrophic events which she had encountered were becoming extremely intolerable for her, specifically due to her delaying the meaning and articulation she needed to use for categorizing these painful events. Marilyn Charles says “...not only does trauma fragment history and destroys the speech but leaves its subject estranged from self and others, it also invites our resistance, making it even more difficult for the communication to register and be recognized.” (2005) Similarly, Leonora's lack of peace arises from her estrangement from both herself and others, due to her reluctance to share her distressing experiences.

When the novel progress we see that her doctor had been trying to direct her towards self- discovery; towards her past which she had been avoiding incessantly. Her doctor enforced her to think more thoughtfully about the events which happened to her and said, “All right, she says mildly, and makes a note on her pad. She flips over a sheet and then turns back, let's go back a bit. James – how did you know him” (207). This question triggered both the traumatic events she encountered – the one she encountered ten years ago and the recent one in which she was in a car accident. This question prompted her in trying to remember the recent event and articulate the former which she had been postponing for years. With the progression of the novel, Leonora started articulating her past trauma not to the Police but to her own self. She said, “No one knows about that part of my life – not even my mum. The only person who knows anything is Clare, and even she doesn't know the full story.” (233) Here it is clear that she is coming to a phase where she is about to give name to her trauma. She said in her stream of consciousness that no one knows the full story. It is very ostensible that those events inflicted trauma on her as a response to her silence. And it can be noticed that so many situations start making way towards her healing, for instance, when James' friend Matt arrived to see her and comments on her relationship with James. Matt says, “A bit, yeah. I know you were ... What would you call it? Childhood sweethearts?” (240) In response to his words she got overwhelmed with emotions and she felt a rush of tears in the back of her throat and felt

her lips were hesitating to answer, she just nodded without saying a word, even though she stayed silent but it was one more step towards her solace.

Later her friend Nina encouraged her to tell her past to Lamarr, a police officer who started inquiring about James and insisted that it was in her best interest, Leonora agreed and while pondering over Nina's advice she thought, "what happened between me and James has nothing to do with any of this. But perhaps Nina is right. Perhaps I should come clean, maybe it would even be a relief, after all these years of silence." (249) It becomes apparent from this line that Leonora has come to the realization of her fault in remaining silent about her past. Leonora decided to tell Lamarr everything, she thought, "when Lamarr comes in the morning I will tell her... I'll tell her the whole truth. Unpicked like this, in the dying light of the evening, it's not as bad as I feared. It's not a motive for murder, just an old, tires grief. Nina was right" (253). The protagonist's decision to disclose her past marks a significant turning point in her narrative identity as she works toward healing. She admitted that her past resentment has unnecessarily defined her identity, even if she realized that it had no influence on the incident with James. This is consistent with the theory of "working through" trauma put out by Cathy Caruth, according to which healing comes from embracing awful experiences into one's narrative. Judith Herman's concept of the work of mourning supports this further by emphasizing the ways in which confronting prior traumas fosters personal development and agency. Thus, the protagonist starts to reconstruct her identity and move past her sorrow by facing her past experiences.

She said, "I have not spoken to him for ten years but I thought of him every single day. He is gone – and, just when I need it most, so is the rage I have nursed all the time, even while I told myself I no longer cared, that it was a part of my past shut away and gone and done, He is gone" (219). These words show that she had been in denial in accepting that she was not completely fine about the incidents which took place in her life in a most horrific manner. It also shows that she is finding resolution for the past events; now she was processing everything in new light; getting a perspective about that and moving towards the healing process. Now her trauma cannot traumatize her any longer because it is no longer repressed, she has freed herself from those bitter, painful, and conflicting memories. Later she came to know that it wasn't James at all who put her through that arduous situation in the first place but someone else. It was Clare who sent the text from his phone and this truth makes Leonora realize that it couldn't have been a bad event at all if she had at least confronted James about the wrong information she got. Now she has healed so she chooses no longer to dwell in past regrets. She chooses to embrace her life and moves away from all the memories which can ruin her life. She goes back to her London apartment and starts living her life peacefully as she has always lived in her place surrounded by books and her dreams.

In Ruth Ware's novel, trauma is represented as something which clings to the person which as a result leads to mental suffering, reluctance to make even very simple decisions. Trauma manifests in Laura in a way which is not forgotten yet difficult to express. This work has represented trauma in a way which supports Pluralistic trauma theory which means 'trauma being inexpressible' is not a defining feature of trauma but just a part of it. The trauma readers witness in this novel is very much remembered by the victim but she just keeps quiet for years because she found it very difficult to deal with. It also shows consequences of undealt situations which leads to more vulnerability which just spirals inside the victim. This work presents a compelling narrative of psychological and emotional healing, culminating in the protagonist's profound reconciliation with her past. By confronting and integrating her experiences, she achieves a state of inner peace that enables her to move forward with a renewed sense of purpose and understanding.

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