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Trauma as a Provocative Pattern in Restoring and Rebuilding the Identities of Characters in Lan Cao's Monkey Bridge

A B S T R A C T

The current paper attempts to identify the theoretical aspects of the post-traumatic stress disorder upon the characters in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*. It endeavors to examine the characters' possibilities to restore their identities by remembering their past myths and homelands. Throughout analyzing the thematic and formal representations of experiences of the war trauma, it raises the questions of whether those traumatized individuals can formulate their personalities to incorporate to the new homeland. It examines the individuals' behaviors that are portrayed throughout the process of digressive narration to explore the effect of the traumatic experiences of war upon their personalities, and recognize their different responding. It aims at adopting specific cultural methods to reconstruct the characters' personalities in their conformation of trauma and re-building new identities by acclimating new language and values.

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الصدمة باعتبارها نمط استنزافي لاستعادة وإعادة بناء هويات الشخصيات في رواية جسر القرد للكاتبه
 لان كاو

م.أحمد خالد حسون / جامعة تكريت / كلية الاداب

الخلاصة:

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تحديد الجوانب النظرية لاضطراب الشخصية بعد الصدمة على الشخصيات في

رواية "جسر القرد" للروائية لان تساو. تسعى الدراسة إلى اختبار إمكانيات الشخصيات لاستعادة هوياتهم من خلال تذكر أساطيرهم السابقة وأوطانهم. ومن خلال تحليل التصورات الموضوعية والشكلية لتجارب صدمة الحرب ، تنير الدراسة تساؤلات عدة في ما إذا كان هؤلاء الأفراد المصابون بصدمات نفسية بإمكانهم صياغة شخصياتهم في الاندماج في الوطن الجديد. كما تختبر الدراسة سلوكيات الأفراد التي يتم تصويرها من خلال عملية السرد الاستطراذي من أجل استكشاف تأثير التجارب الصادمة للحرب على شخصياتهم ، وأدراك استجاباتهم المختلفة. تهدف أيضا إلى إيجاد طرق ثقافية جديدة لإعادة بناء شخصياتهم في تشكيلهم للصدمات وإعادة بناء هويات جديدة من خلال الخلق والتأقلم مع لغة وقيم جديدة.

Introduction

Monkey Bridge is a novel written in 1997 by Lan Cao. It tells the story of a Vietnamese family, the mother named Thanh and her daughter Mai, who are taken to America as refugees during the American Vietnam War. Mai is rescued from the war and lives with the family of Uncle Michael who is a retired American colonel and a friend of her father. Mai works as a nurse at the military hospital in Saigon when her mother Thanh comes to the military hospital in the United States for recovering from complications of mental and psychological breakdown. They settle and start a new life in Little Saigon, which is a region for the Vietnamese immigrants in Arlington in Virginia.

1.1. Trauma Theory (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder PTSD)

The concept of trauma is described as "individual experience to establish a different identity by the exposing to a social situation such as natural disaster or war" (Summerfield 18). The concept Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was first coined by the American Psychiatric Association during 1980s. It is associated with the physical incarnation of disorder which is directly related to war conditions. This allows the socio-political factors of social landscape to give the individuals a different perception and response of how traumatic events are created according to certain circumstances. Consequently, different types of trauma present various responses, which are often depicted as outcomes of the social evaluation of the experience. Those pathological responses of trauma are classified under the DSMIV, which is a classification including the recognized mental health disorders

and post-traumatic stress disorder. It relies on a view of the self as individuated and autonomous. Derek Summerfield indicates:

“Underlying the concept of *PTSD* is the assumption that the essence of human experience of war and atrocity can be captured by negative psychological effects as they are understood..., to be elicited in the mental life of each individual victim” (18).

The patterns of memory and identity, for those individuals, “fail to recognize the importance of cultural and social traditions”(Summerfield 24) that influence those emotional response to a traumatic experience. Trauma can be described throughout exposing the memory as “a photographic record of experience” (Balaev 2012: 30), to reflect the contingency of traumatic experience and the variability of remembrance according to social narration and individuals’ traits. Trauma can be described as an event that intrinsically breaks up the consciousness and gradually erases knowledge, depending on actual recall in which all experiences are completely recorded and stored in the mind. Consequently, most of the emotional responses to a traumatic incidents are not similar, the traumatic memory should be retrieved and narrated to others in order to recover, and find their new identities.

The studies show a complex and contradictory view of trauma and memory, rather than only demonstrating that the remembrance of a trauma is a single, fixed memory that revisits the protagonist in a reduplicative form in flashbacks or nightmares. The individuals recognize that the traumatic experiences can be understood through various actions and rituals to discover the self and integrated identity. In *Monkey Bridge*, both Mai and Thanh encounter the traumatic experiences of war, but each responses her experiences in different and individual way. Their responses and reactions differ according to two specific factors. The first factor is the individual variants and the relations to a specific classes of community, such as the ethnic community in Virginia, urban Saigon, or the rural Vietnamese. The second factor is the individual variants such as their treatment with the traumatic past and relationship to the national culture and family. Both carry mythical concepts of identity that lead to understand their sense of self. In this novel, remembering is an active process of creation and revision, not a process of reproduction.

From a literary and psychological perspectives, Sigmund Freud is the original source who describes the traumatic experiences. Freud displays the relationship between history, trauma, and collectivity, since it concerns “with interpreting the link, the mysterious, and the unspeakable through language”(14). Influenced by Freud's psychological theory of trauma, Cathy Caruth formulates “the trauma and memory according to a psychoanalytical method to determine the contexts of traumatic experiences of war (3). The complicated relationship “between knowing and not knowing” is the point that “the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of trauma precisely meet... [which] are engaged in the process of motivating the memory to recall what had happened in the war zone”(Caruth, 1996, 3). According to the abreactive model of trauma, the traumatic experience “produces a temporal gap and a dissolution of the self” (Balaev, 2008,143). Those individuals, who suffered from trauma, share the act of remembering the brutality of war. Trauma “cannot be determined in the simple violent or original event of an individual's past; but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature...returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth, 1996, 4). Therefore, trauma refers to a thread of continuity which links the past to the present and, consequently, constitutes a whole traumatic history. Psychologically, trauma is the experience of helplessness in encountering the force in which the ego cannot control at the moment of its occurrence. In this regard, *PTSD* is the development of stress and disorder after a severe and direct confrontation with death and violence. Trauma is defined as a story of a wound that cannot be fully comprehended and assimilated unless the traumatized is engaged in the process of narrating. The experience of trauma is “the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life” (Caruth, 1996, 69). Reliving the traumatic past and grasping its effect through war is the way literature emulate voices that should be heeded and thus overcome the seductive pull of war's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

In certain novels, that formed as a flexible, active, traumatic memory, are often represented memories within cultural contexts. In every act of remembering the protagonist manipulates the memory of the traumatic experience in ways that alter its meaning. Remembering the past incidents can be an important action in the novel, but memory of the incident is not necessarily depicted as fixed. There are a wide extent of variability concerning the significance of a verbal reconstruction of the traumatic incident and the importance of memory. Trauma is “a confluence of human and social forces that come together in a local landscape to shape the sense

of an event as well as the texture of its remembrance”(Balaev 2012: 41). Traumatic experience is presented within the forms of immigration and social assimilation by creating alternative concepts for finding the individuals' identities and states of subjectivity for the characters.

1.2. The Narrative Digression of the Traumatic Experience

Throughout the narrative digression of *Monkey Bridge*, Cao attempts to reflect different manifestations of the trauma in reformulating the subjective positions of plot and characters. In this novel, Mai creates a sense of double consciousness which split between the past and present life when the traumatic remembrance prevents her to involve with the reality. As Mai describes that Thanh's physical collapse is rooted in the emotional trauma of war since she left her grand-father Baba Quan, they “missed each other at their place of rendezvous on the 30th April, 1975” (*Monkey Bridge* 10). Therefore, Thanh arrived the United States without Baba Quan and this leads to Thanh's emotional castration: “I had lived quietly with the tragedy of my grandfather's disappearance, and I, in moments alone, had tried to piece together the missing minutes that led to his absence. The muffled stillness of that day continued to cast a long, heavy pall over our lives” (*Monkey Bridge* 10).

The moment of remembrance is a good formulation to incorporate them to the new homeland and new nation. Patricia San José Rico describes the moment of remembrance as a flashback which is portrayed as “the cinematic possibility of literally reproducing or cutting back to a scene from the past.. which is used to provide the reader with glimpses of a character's life at specific moments”(13). Consequently, the narrative method is used not only to enlighten the readers about a character's past experiences, but also to depict the psychological effect of trauma. After a short visit to her mother, Thanh, at the military hospital in Saigon due to the suffering from complications of mental breakdown, Mai narrates her memories of the war and her voluntarily job of taking care of the wounded soldiers. She describes the memories of battlefield, and the dying declarations of the wounded soldiers throughout a narrative dissociation:

“The smell of blood, warm and wet, rose from the floor and settled into the solemn stillness of the hospital air. I could feel it like an unhurried chill in my joints, a slow moving red that smoldered in a

floating ether of dull, gray smoke. All around me....I knew what I would see next. His face, not the face before the explosion, but the face after, motionless in a liquefied red that poured from a tangle of delicate veins” (*Monkey Bridge* 1–2).

This dissociative narrative method of the novel leads an altered sense of consciousness of the reality and identity. Mai describes the brutal realities of Vietnam War she witnesses in Saigon in her childhood. This shows the fusion of the past in the present when Mai returned to a traumatic moment in her body, therefore the past is usually her present. Mai's traumatic and painful relationship to her past “creates a conflict how to recall her roots, as well as how to express a diasporic identity and develop a sense of place in her adopted nation.”(Satterlee:142). According to *PTSD*, the individuals who “re-experience a traumatic incident repeatedly throughout intrusive thoughts; in other words, those survivors of trauma repetitively recreate a past trauma in their present lives, as it is one of the signs of a previous trauma” (Heide 9). In this novel, trauma demonstrates certain losses existed within a particular cultural context and physical environment. The traumatic experience of Thanh causes deep pain that leads eventually to suicide. While the traumatic experience of Mai is conveyed by the annoying feelings of the mental vigilance she passed in the wartime:

“One wrong move . . . the force of too many things rammed inside my brain. I was already back there, ... and something had tipped one notch too far and everything was pouring inside out, a live current of nervous wires connecting me to disorder, to insanity” (*Monkey Bridge* 12).

This reflects the fear of the past which is interrupted the present with feelings of despair and discontinuity. Mai feels that her existence in the new community as “an immigrant is temporary and fragile, vulnerable to the memories that threaten to throw her off balance” (Balaev 2012: 44). Both Mai and Thanh are trapped in a liminal consciousness due to the effects of emotional and cultural dislocation. Thanh narrates her nostalgic recollections of Saigon while Mai narrates in the first person method the diasporaic experiences and her traumatic memories in Ba Xuyen. In fact, Mai attempts to describe the sudden obtrusion of

past into present to uncover different levels of traumatic memories she passed : “What was I supposed to say to this?... My dilemma was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither” (*Monkey Bridge* 88). At the end of the Vietnam War, they struggle to cope the traumatic and painful memories of the war by adapting with the new language and culture of the new home, United States. The mother Thanh immigrates to the Vietnamese Arlington in Virginia, but she “did not notice that she had left the age of guerrilla warfare” (*Monkey Bridge* 30) since she intends to recede into her ethnic identity.

1.3. Restoring the Mythical and Cultural Identity

Monkey Bridge shapes a complicated net of associations between the trauma of alienation and the loss of identity of the ancestral homeland which encountered by the Vietnamese refugees between their histories and cultures even they “belonged to neither” (*Monkey Bridge* 88). Trauma enforces those Vietnamese refugees who suffered from traumatic experiences to reformulate their cultural identity since they are extremely obsessive in their culture and tradition. Cultural identity “reveals the mutual cultural and historical experiences which united them as one people with stable and unchanging frames of reference” (Hall 223). It means that culture is constantly changing by the influences of present though it remains related to the historical past. In “The Location of Culture”, Homi K Bhabha describes “the theory of cultural hybridity concerning the questions of identity and national affiliation, to determine the identity of the colonizers and colonized, as well as the location of its associated discourses”(13). Since those cultures may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, and resistant to its assimilationist technologies; the cultural hybridity is deployed to draw their borderline conditions and reinscribe the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity. This novel presents a cultural assimilation that arises larger questions concerning the fears and fantasies about “the psychic incorporation and assimilation of trauma [and] it explores ways of reclaiming that body apart from destructive logics, and it searches for means of moving from abjection to healing” (Hinrichsen 23).

The immigrants encountered difficulties in their traumatic displacement in which their process of repositioning in the new nation has a big difference between the first and second generations in diasporians. Thanh, who represents the first generation immigrants of the Little Saigon, hopes to go back to their beloved Vietnam. Mai comments, “this was my mother’s Little Saigon community, a cordial and modest grouping of exiles intend on maintaining the steady rhythm of the old” against “the demands of a new American life” (*Monkey Bridge* 133). The displaced Thanh tries to separate her previous life from the present one in the United States to overcome the traumatic loss of homeland. This old generation fails to commit to the ways of the United States and even to be aware of their difference, “they had never managed... they needed for a makeover in Little Saigon world in and of itself...with seductive powers of nostalgia and single minded conviction”(*Monkey Bridge* 146).

Those immigrants strive for replacing the past with mythic narratives that conform to the traditional values of Vietnamese, as Mai clarifies that “the habits and manners of Little Saigon ...with an anthropologist’s eye” (*Monkey Bridge* 146). In their attempting to restoring their identities, those immigrants persuade to get new signifier to introduce themselves with new home. When they arrived in the United States as refugees, they have not citizenship legal or Identities papers to label them as new citizens. They fail to replace their traumatic and painful past with the present, therefore they create new pasts for themselves. Mai comments, “Not only could [they] become anything [they] wanted to be in America, [they] could change what [they] had once been in Vietnam” (*Monkey Bridge* 40). Besides, she admits that: “I too have tried to extinguish the imprints of my life and create alternative versions that suit my imagination ... the world I wished I could have handed to you as the unhidden truth of a mother’s life” (*Monkey Bridge* 42). Mai imagines Uncle Michael as “a refugee ... who had left something of himself behind in Southcast Asia when the war cited” (Darda 174). He reminds her of her own father, she states that “here was an American replica of my father, his death and life absorbed quietly in a Farmington home He was now a retired colonel in Farmington, with six unuprootable years in Vietnam-now a soldier without a war-and I an immigrant from Saigon” (*Monkey Bridge* 67). Mai describes that their existences as state of mind rather than a geographical location of Vietnam, when

she declares that they inhabit this cruel region with her as refugees from Vietnam who could never feel at home in his New England saltbox house.

In *Monkey Bridge*, Cao describes the refugees' persistence to restore their identities throughout rebirthing the past to make the traumatic history more harmonious in their new life in the United States. Therefore, legends and myths of ancestral land illustrate the trauma of being obliged to leave their land which it plays an important role in uniting their families through the generations. The term "haunting of the past" is used to re-form the cultural and ethnic identity in a positive view, "these narratives act as rituals of mourning, in which the community works through its traumatic memory, turning bad haunting to good haunting" (Tuon 12). For example, "anti-Vietcong refugee community draft dodgers and ordinary foot soldiers could become decorated veterans of battlefields as famous as Kontum and Pleiku" or "a girl who once worked at Saigon's Queen Bee... acquired a past as a teacher from a small village" (*Monkey Bridge* 40). These examples attempt to illustrate the transition of the traumatic absence from the past into present, and how the Vietnamese past history forms the refugee identity in "the complete absence of identity and history" (*Monkey Bridge* 41). Like many Vietnamese refugees, Thanh reform a past for Mai's peace of mind, "it is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha 63). She attempts to keep "Baba Quan's political affiliation as a secret, even from her daughter Mai" (*Monkey Bridge* 40). She recreates a past for tranquility and peace of mind since "it is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha 63). Thanh creates many mythic and fairy tales to introduce a long list of Vietnamese patriots, for instances, the mythical story of Vietnamese hero of Baba Quan. Roland Barthes discusses that myths "transform history into nature" (129) when she attempts to relate herself to a mythic past. In this novel, Thanh admits that she "tried to extinguish the imprints of her life and create alternate versions that suit her imagination and heal her soul" (*Monkey Bridge* 227), as a way to reveal her traumatic history, family, and the land Vietnam.

In this novel, Cao presents the mythological stories with a great importance to reveal Mai's nostalgia desire to her homeland. Unlike Thanh who cannot think in any possible redemptive return to her homeland due to her ambivalent relationship

to her family with her traumatic experience and her father's betrayal. According to the betel nut myth, a person's soul "cannot live outside its homeland because one must protect the spirits of ancestors... The Vietnamese must inhabit the land of their ancestors, so that, the ancestors' souls achieve eternal life and regeneration" (84). This myth carries a consciousness defined by moral codes which conveyed throughout particular cultural ideologies since they are stories drawn from society's history. This reflects the modern diasporic life when the immigrants' return to the native land will be impossible. They have "acquired ... the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing moral consciousness—with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain" (Slotkin 5). The separation between the past and present is due to the disability to reconcile between the mythic notions of a cultural identity of their native homelands and a traumatic departure from the native homeland, on the other hand.

1.4 Re-Building and Creating New Identity

Trauma imposes a provocative pattern which emphasizes a particular treatment according to the cultural framework, temporal specificities, and individual variants. the trauma is identified by individual experiences that Thanh and Mai encountered within a cultural context to establish new identity after their repositions to the United States. Each character reveals the traumatic experiences from different perspective in terms of personal and mythic contexts.

In *Monkey Bridge*, the impulse to establish a new identity for immigrants becomes a contradictory process in a cultural and normative narration concerning the remembrance and forgetfulness of their traumatic experience. Both, Mai and Thanh, follow a strategy of forgetfulness to resist their traumatic past, and to reconstitute their identities: "There was, after all, something awesome about a truly uncluttered beginning, the complete absence of identity, of history" (41). Mai describes the power of forgetting their traumatic experiences and fantasy in this community: "it became something of a community endeavor, the compulsion to deceive ... Little Saigon was the still-tender, broken-off part of the old world ... our ghosts could roam unattached to the old personalities we once inhabited"(39–40). Mai clarifies that she have to adopt an altered position which is predicated upon

pretending “that the world was the same now as it had been the day before” (42). Similarly, Thanh tries to reinvent the past by describing that her facial burned scar from the napalm was a kitchen accident to hide the origin of the wound.

The method of maintaining a new identity that the protagonists adopted is a repositioning in the new world which depends on a contradictory awareness of considering the new world as different one. For instance, the mother Thanh and her daughter Mai have to conform a new standards of language, behavior, and education. Therefore, it leads to create deep conflicts between the previous and new standards of recognizing the self and the world. Mai indicates: “It was, in many ways, a lesson in what was required to sustain a new identity: it all had to do with being able to adopt a different posture. . . . The process, which was as surprising as a river reversing course and flowing upstream, was easier said than done” (39). Throughout the recollection of the past, Thanh confronts her traumatic experiences with a greater ambivalence of the self and society concepts. She pursues to reformulate cultural identity and create a controlled relationship with her daughter Mai depending on a past without trauma. She pretends with idealistic version as a way to forget the traumatic incidents which disrupt her relations to her family and homeland. For example, She represents herself as a lucky woman who was chosen to live with Uncle Khan, the landlord, without mentioning that she obliged to live with the landlord’s mistress to pay off the debts of Baba Quan. Another example is her identical portrayal of the eccentric and loving farmer of Baba Quan, who devoted to farming and his religious practices, without revealing his making intricate minefield to target American soldiers. Throughout this fanciful narration, Thanh depicts reconfigurations of the past incidents she experienced to obscure and erase the past traumatic recollections of horror and violence. On one hand, she reveals the levels of trauma to the readers in which the protagonists repressed. On the other hand, she finds a way to cope with the traumatic events and protect her daughter Mai.

Another therapy of the trauma is the landscape which functions as a reference for visualizing the identity as well as loyalty to the Vietnamese nation. The land presents a symbolic repository of a paradisiacal rice field that reveals the soul of the ancestors and Thanh’s soul. It substantiates a new identity rooted in a mythic and national landscape in an attempt to forget the past and to eliminate trauma. Keith Basso describes the relationship between landscape and identity:

“Landscapes are available in symbolic terms as well ... they can be “detached” from their fixed spatial moorings and transformed into instruments of thought and vehicles of purposive behavior. Thus transformed, landscape and the places that fill them become tools for the imagination, expressive means for accomplishing verbal deeds, and also, of course, eminently portable possessions to which individuals can maintain deep and abiding attachments, regardless of where they travel” (102)

The landscapes evoke imaginative and mythic dimensions human condition, and they symbolize regeneration and totality. In this novel, they represent the tools for reconstructing the identities of protagonists in the United States.

Conclusion

Trauma refers to a sense of cultural loss which constitutes a part of memory for the immigrants who suffered from the traumatic experiences, complexities of life, a sense of dislocation, and identity loss. In *Monkey Bridge*, Cao portrays the influence of traumatic circumstances upon the characters, Mai and Thanh, who are haunted by painful intrusions of their war memories, and then, they lost the Vietnamese identity. Cao employs a postmodern digressive narration of coding and narrating to portray the memory that documents and activates the collective cognition of the traumatic event. It leads to examine the individual experiences of war trauma and explores their traumatic experiences with different responses. This novel provides an insight into the trauma of subjectivity instead of claiming that trauma shatters identity. Trauma represents as a motivational pattern to reconstruct the individual recognizing of self, reality and individuals’ relations to the world. In *Monkey Bridge*, the individuals pursuit to coexist and create opportunities to form new cultural identity by learning American education and language as a kind of resistance against assimilation and accommodation. This leads to a flexible process of remembering to the past events and recreating of perception. It leads to recognize the positive attributes and alternative concepts of trauma upon the characters in *this novel* for exploring the individuals’ identities, rebuild the subjectivity of personalities, and integrating in the new community.

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