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The Conflict of Recalling Traumatic Memories in Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train"

A B S T R A C T

Traumatic experiences are characterized by its prelinguistic tendency. War fiction, however, refutes this statement when it reflects on the components of war so as to bear witness to its overwhelming nature as well as its ambiguous realities. Recalling the traumatic wounds of war, in this regard, is a testimonial avenue grounded on the desires of its narrators to be transformed from the confined scope of individuality into a more collective one. Written on the background of 2003 Iraq War, Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train" represents war's aftermath and the difficulty soldiers faced in adhering to ordinary life after being home. The conflict is a psychological one; it is shaped within the consciousness of a female soldier whose traumatized memory struggles against the ghost of past that haunts present. The study argues that Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train" follows the traumatized consciousness of an American veteran whose narrative line is marked by fragmentation, nonlinear plot, and the fluctuation between the past and the present. It also argues that the story itself is a testimonial narrative that aims at recordings individual suffering and thus placing it within a collective framework that motivates solidarity among wounded victims. The study relies on the psychological and literary aspects of trauma theory. It significantly draws on Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experiences*, Ann Whitehead *Trauma Fiction*, Shoshana Felman's *Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, and other theorists in the field of trauma theory.

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تعزيز التنمية الشاملة والتباين من خلال التحقيق في مجموعة واسعة من الثقافات العالمية

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الخلاصة:

تمتاز تجربة الصدمة وحسب رأي بعض النقاد بصعوبة التعبير عنها لغوياً، إلا أن السرديات القصصية التي سلطت الضوء على الحرب وقساوتها وواقعها المرير قد دحضت هذه الفرضية عندما استخدمت تقنيات سردية وحبكة درامية اظهرت حالة الموازنة بين الشكل السردى ومضمونه الامر الذي نقل الصراع

النفسي من حيز الفردية الذاتية الى حيز الذاكرة الجمعية المتضامنة والتي تطمح لمعالجة الجروح الناجمة عن الحرب.

يتناول البحث تحليل قصة القطار للكاتبة مارييت كالونسكي والتي تسلط الضوء على شخصية نسائية شاركت في الحرب الامريكية على العراق عام ٢٠٠٣ وعانت بعد عودتها من ذاكرتها المليئة بتجارب الحرب المريرة. استند البحث في تحليله لهذه القصة على الاطار النظري لتجربة الصدمة بشقيها الادبي والنفسي وبذلك تناولت كثير من المنظرين مثل كاثيرين كارووث و أن وايت هيد و شيشونا فيلمان وآخرون.

1-Introduction

Trauma is usually defined as the return of the repressed. Overwhelming experiences return to haunt the traumatized individual via memories, flashback, and nightmares and thus place him between the forces that split the self into an old self and new one. While the old self tries to pull the traumatized individual to the life he was accustomed to, the new one detaches him from the external world he is surrounded by; it imprisons him within the limits of traumatized memory. It is through this memory that the traumatized individual moves back and forth between the past and the present—a matter that is represented in the literary text by means of a fragmented structure of narration.

Pioneered by Cathy Caruth, the theoretical framework of trauma is established on the grounds of psychoanalytic poststructural approach. The following study, however, adopts a structural approach which fosters the layers of Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train". In other words, the study elaborates on the traumatic dispute through the multiple layers of the text which entail its title, the historical and biographical contexts, milieu, and aesthetic effects produced by literary devices. These layers, situated within the theoretical framework of trauma, collectively dramatize the mechanism of war and its after effect, namely post-traumatic stress disorder.

War is among the most outstanding external forces that lead to trauma. It is defined as an overwhelming experience which the ego cannot master at the moment of its occurrence. Interestingly enough, war's aftermath, namely post-traumatic stress disorder, is engendered by a severe and direct confrontation with death and violence. In relation to the military combat Ruth Leys in *Trauma: A Genealogy* explains that Freud's response to war identifies the traumatized consciousness as "the conflict between different parts of the ego itself, that is between the soldier's old peace-loving ego...and his new war-loving ego, or instinct for aggression" (2000, 22). Cathy Caruth believes that trauma is much more than a psychological illness; it is rather a story of a wound that cannot be

fully comprehended and assimilated unless the traumatized is engaged in the process of narrating. To quote Caruth, "the experience of trauma is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life (Caruth, 1997, 69). Reliving the traumatic past and grasping its effect through war literature emulate voices that should be heeded and thus overcome the seductive pull of war's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth confirms that the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing is the point at which the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of trauma precisely meet (Caruth, 1996, 3). Both are engaged in the process of motivating the memory to recall what had happened in the war zone. Literature and psychoanalysis, in this regard, depend upon the abreactive model of trauma, which is used to assert the position that traumatic experience produces a temporal gap and a dissolution of the self (Balaev, 2008,143). War literature, as a medium reflecting on individual experiences in the form of memoirs, poetry and fiction, has become a major source for studying the connection between society, man, and war. It functions as a means for understanding a traumatized psyche that, symbolically, stands for a collective traumatized consciousness. Such collectivity is shared by all those who have actually practiced the experience of war. Accordingly, the aforementioned literary work to be analyzed in this study has been chosen in a way to solidify and emphasize this point.

Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train" is categorized under the umbrella of trauma fiction that is theorized by Anne Whitehead and Michael Balaev. It tackles the traumatized consciousness of an American female soldier who recently returns from Iraq War. The unnamed narrator elaborates on her overwhelming experience through a disturbed memory that "shatters [her] cognitive and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of memory's ordinary system"(Leys, 2000, 298). In this regard, Mariette's trauma narrative is a projection of the shattered assumptions which claims that a traumatic experience can alter one's views about the meaningfulness of the world and the worthiness of the self: "She wasn't always like this, lost and hurt and wanting nothing else. She used to want more for herself. She used to want bigger things." (77) The protagonist's trauma shatters her Self into an old and new one. While the old self is related to the civil identity before war, the new self represents a traumatized identity whose psyche is captured by memories of war and its failure to readjust to civil life.

"The Train" is a testimonial narrative through which Kalinowski fictionalizes individual experience of war trauma so as to come across a truth; a truth about traumatized soldiers who cannot survive unless their individual stories

are narrated. Kalinowski, in this regard, overtly tackles collective traumatic feelings shared by all of American veterans. This supported by what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub assert in their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. They believe that literature is a means by which we speak about trauma and thus heal its rupture of history. Kalinowski tries to attract the reader's attention to a collective traumatized consciousness; she significantly speaks about it so as to work through before it is acted out and internalized into an individual and collective identity.

"The Train" is included in an anthology entitled *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*. Writers of this anthology believe that their stories bear witness to "the terrible truths of what war has done and continues to do to [them]"(Scranton, 2013, vii). The anthology does not discuss historical or political information about war in Iraq; it rather presents a fictionalized experience in which war is the main source of a psychological conflict against which traumatized soldiers seek reconciliation, survival, and the potential to confront a kind of trauma that affects the very core of their being. The stories of this anthology share other characteristics like the simple style marked by the use of the first person narration, the important role of the narrator in the text and the whole action, and the retrospective focus upon a particular period of time which is marked by the use of the past simple tense. Interestingly enough, fictionalizing private and collective experiences of veterans after returning home enables writers of this anthology to register the state of "in between" that marks their collective traumatic consciousness. The act of writing, in this regard, is an attempt to fill in gaps so as to be engaged in the process of re-individualization.

"The Train" represents the negative response to trauma which the protagonist acts it out via her traumatizing memories. She recalls the details of the whole experience and thus imprisons her trauma within the borders of her inner-self. In her *War Experience and Trauma in American Literature: A Study of American Military Memoirs of Operation Iraqi Freedom*, Lena-Simon Gunther explains that "the focus on the plight and experience of one soldier direct[s]the focus of the reader towards a seemingly all-American boys exposed to the realities of war"(Gunther, 2014, 28). This finds its echo in the unnamed narrator of "The Train" It is as if the narrative intentionally releases its narrator from the limited scope of her individual traumatic identity so as to transform it into a broader field that represents collectivity. The unnamed narrator, in this regard, does not only represent herself; she symbolically represents collective traumatized soldiers whose identities are blended and shattered between the traumatic memories of the military world and the present civic life. In her *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, Michelle Balaev, within this framework, explains that situating an

individual protagonist within a unique individual traumatic experience is one of the main tricks in trauma fiction in a sense that he may function to represent an experience of a group of people; it provides a whole picture of every person (Balaev, 2012, 17). In this regard, the unnamed narrator in "The Train" represents "every soldier figure" whose traumatic conflict is related to a historical event, namely Iraq war. He may represent the archetypal figure of the Unknown Soldier. Yet the collective patriotic identity of the Unknown Soldier is replaced by a collective traumatic one.

2- The Representation of Trauma in Kalinowski's Narrative

Reading and examining any literary text imply the act of passing through its different structural layers. The title of the text, in this regard, is the first clue to the meaning and sometimes the context of the text. The title, "The Train," indicates the traumatized memory that moves "back and forth" (59) between the stations of the past and present. In fact, this "swinging" (59) movement gives the unnamed narrator "the time to think" (59) of bad days whose overwhelming "tightness inches slowly across her skin." (59) Literally, the daily movement of the train indicates the routine of a mundane day; however, the normality of the day is parallelized when she is occupied by the unwilling response to trauma. In fact, this overwhelming tightness of post-traumatic stress disorder lurks beneath the surface structure of everyday life and thus splits the protagonist's psyche into an old self and younger one. She rides the train to take a further step towards future and to step away from Iraq where "she could feel worry growing somewhere inside her." (66) She rides the train whenever she swings between her present experiences in New York and the traumatizing past in Iraq where she witnessed the death of her corporal, Kavanagh, at the hand of a "hajji". The train, in this sense, serves the purpose of avoiding traumatic memories; she avoids imprisonment in her trauma like "a goldfish trapped in a bowel." (60) This finds its echo in what Judith Herman believes:

The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma. (Herman, 1997, 27)

Memory, according to what Herman says, is of two kinds: the narrative and the traumatized. While the narrative memory follows a line of causal probability in narrating trauma, the traumatized memory is marked by its fragmented structure and a forked vision of the whole ordeal.

The traumatized memory in "The Train" imposes itself now and then to the extent that the protagonist is repeatedly invaded by war's devastating images; she is constantly haunted by the phantom of women and children struggling to survive death. Whenever her narrative memory tries to adjust to life in New York, her traumatized memory, by contrast, pulls her back to Iraq. The forces of these two memories are engaged in the struggle of the Self vs. Other. In other words, the traumatized memory (Self) is the subject that tries, to the limits, to reduce the narrative memory (Other) to level of an object so as to prevent it from any attempt that results in self-actualization. In *The Exisle Reinvention: Postcolonial Trauma and Recovery in Contemporary Island Literature*, Marilena Zackheos argues that the traumatized is a historical subject in a sense that he is captured by a particular time of the traumatic event. He is plagued by the recurrent memories of a particular traumatic space. The traumatized, in other words, is frozen in time and implicitly preoccupied with this place. (Zackheos, 2011, 78) This can be clearly recognized when the narrator says: "Frozen, each of these images floating across her memory, photographs that confuse the true progression of events." (63) According to this context, the protagonist in so many times is far beyond the influence of her actual surroundings. She is imprisoned within the borders of her inner self.

"The progression of events" seeps into one of the most important aspects of modernism's reality that is psychological realism in which time is divided into public and private time. While public time is related to the actual time of the clock, the private one takes place within the mind of the character and thus detaches him from the awareness of the progression of the true or actual time. In the case of "The Train[s]" protagonist, the private time is involved with her memories as they capture her consciousness without any obstacle.

The fluctuation of the conscious between public and private time places the unnamed protagonist in a state of "in betweenness". Such state manifests the brutality of the military self and its constant struggle against the tenderness of the civilian one. Elizabeth K. Rosen confirms that being in between revolves the tension that takes place between the "world of the narrator and the real world of the story" (Rosen, 2008, xxiii). To put it differently, the traumatized individual lives in between two worlds: the world of his inner self which is motivated by a traumatized memory and the outer world within which he used to live in the past and has to reengage in the present. Discussing the sense of being in between,

Stacy Peebles in *Welcome to the Suck* argues that "many veterans return to discover the unexpected pain of being "in between" war and home, not able to fully exist in either state"(Peebles, 3, 2011). This finds its echo in dead bird that the protagonist sees on the ground of her mother's garden in Vermont:

The bird lay on its back, its wings gently spread and feet curled up to its belly, looking for all the world as if it had simply fallen out of the sky, body, frozen midflight...her younger self tried hard to understand why the death-eyes of the bird felt so familiar. She tried to remember where she'd seen them before. And then her older self-remembered for her: eyes staring up into the cloudy Iraqi sky..."(61)

The image of the dead bird correlates with images of death she witnessed in Iraq. Burying the bird makes her think of "being down, beneath. To be underground. To be where Kavanagh was." (62) In fact, these images are juxtaposed next to each other to constitute a "vertigo growing deep behind her forehead," (62) a vertigo by which her body and soul are pulled apart.

Living with a traumatized psyche transforms her identity into a traumatized one. This particular identity is constructed under the pressure of the return of the repressed, namely war experiences in Iraq:

She could feel Iraq everywhere; feel the dusty film of the desert covering every object and surface, her skin. She couldn't wash the desert away and all she saw was gray: gray sky, gray tinted sand, gray movements of bodies rushing. Or lying still. Darker gray pools spread across the ground. She smelled flesh and sweat and bile and she couldn't tell if these sights were solid or ghosts. (66-67)

Iraq, in this sense, is not a mere "backdrop screen for the action of the plot" (Balaev, 2012, xv); it is rather a major generative character in a sense that it determines the formulation of the traumatized identity of the protagonist.

What formulates and returns to capture the traumatized identity is an unexpected and sudden event—an event that the victim may seem to be unaffected by at the moment of its occurrence; he significantly suffers after a period of time—a matter that marks the temporal structure of the traumatic experience. In other words, the traumatized victim does not comprehend his trauma at the moment of its occurrence, but rather belatedly when the unconscious sends it back to the conscious. Multiple memories from the traumatizing past, namely from the location of war, return to haunt the unnamed protagonist—a matter that makes her more exhausted and more preoccupied with her trauma and fear as well: "it was her fear of the past and the memories of that day that first drove her to ride the

train." (66) Fearful feelings are also recognized when she hears the sound of the two-year child crying in the apartment above her ones.

Fearful feelings in connection with her traumatic memories are identified as grey:

But all she saw was grey...their worn-out where clothes beginning to look like the gray sky and gray sand. The men's faces beginning to look like the gray sand, and she couldn't discern them from the desert, from every other hajji she'd seen...Gray surrounded the day...rainy gray...gray clouds made her squint and tear up. (64)

This particular color is often associated with mystery, depression, and loss. However, it does not have the definite connotations of black and white. This symbolically refers to the way the narrator's traumatized memory is squeezed between the past and the present. Anne Whitehead in her *Trauma Fiction* believes that this literary genre seeps into the postcolonial novel. What whitehead means is that the struggle between the past and the present is the struggle between two binary oppositions, the colonizer and the colonized. In the case of trauma fiction, the colonizer will be the past that tries to impose its power upon the colonized present. Their struggle, which is clearly embodied in "The Train", is an "unfinished sentence." (62) In such sentence the end will remain open to more suffering engendered by traumatizing memories.

In spite of lacking a linear plot and a definite closure, her traumatized memory recalls different episodes that stop her like a train stopped by different stations. The death of her friend Kavanagh in the war zone is among the most important stations that the train of her memories stops at. The day when she witnessed the death of her friend "seems misplaced drawn from every other day she spent in Iraq." (63) That day was marked by its "heavy clouds [,] stretched-thin feeling,"(65) and consequently heavy tightness came for the first time with fear. It is that particular fear that stopped her that day to look at the "hajji", the suicide bomber. Feeling his difference and "passivity," (66) her fear attracted her attention to that particular man.

The labyrinth of that traumatizing day has many details that find their echo in what Sigmund Freud discusses in his essay "The Uncanny." Freud explains that " the subject of the "uncanny" is a province of this kind. It undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror" (Freud, 1919) Freud adds that the uncanny is usually connected with death and dead bodies. This is recognized when the unnamed protagonist recalls the scene of Kavanagh's death, a scene of "dusty red and fear." (70) The protagonist says : "Kavanagh was on her back, blood splashed all around her body...[her face is]

untouched, pale...A soldier passed with an armful of body bags, and she took one from him, then found a pair of surgical gloves in the medic's trauma bag...Her face ached and she tasted blood in her mouth." (70-1) The scene is filled with many uncanny sensations that the protagonist tries to repress. The prefix "un" is nothing but a mark of the protagonist's repressed trauma that keeps "circling" inside her consciousness. It is like "a movie in her head, rolling, rolling like the earth spinning constantly into, out of the sunlight." (72) With such trauma, her memory has a circular existence in a sense that it rotates around the same striking zone, namely Iraq. Her traumatized memory is motivated by the powerful law of the universe, the law of gravity that always pulls her down to where she belong, the death underground.

Conclusion

Discussing the aforementioned narrative identifies the idiosyncrasy by which individual experiences are narrated in relation to enormous conceptualization of individual and collective traumatic damage. Analyzing the modern and postmodern techniques by which individual experiences of war trauma are verbalized, one comes up with the conclusion that the fictional structure functions as a declarative memory which speaks neutrally for traumatized consciousnesses. It presents the common characteristics of the traumatized identity that does not distinguish between the victimizer and the victimized. The fictional structure of the examined narrative draws on stylistic devices that transfer the pain of trauma from its individual uniqueness to a wide scope of collectivity.

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