



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 3 No.4, December 2018

Editor : Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544
Vol.3, No.4, December, 2018

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

The Trauma in Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Lajwanti"

Dr. Panchali Mukherjee

Associate Professor,
Department of Arts,
Christ Academy Institute for Advanced Studies
Thubarahalli, Bangalore 560066
Email: panchali.mukherjee@gmail.com
panchalim@christacademy.in

Submitted 24 November 2018
Revised 28 November 2018
Accepted 21 December 2018

Abstract: The research paper will study the text Rajinder Singh Bedi's (1915-1984) "Lajwanti" in the context of "Trauma Theory" by focusing on the trauma experienced by the protagonist Lajwanti during the time of partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. The paper will examine the somatic or psycho-somatic disturbances leading to disruption of memory and therefore identity as a result of the experience, that is, in this case Partition of the Indian subcontinent. It studies the three different clusters of symptoms related to the traumatic experience of Lajwanti manifested in re-experiencing the traumatic event through the intrusive flashbacks, recurring dreams or later situations that repeat or echo the original; the second cluster of symptoms shows persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma; and the third cluster of symptoms shows increased arousal including loss of temper-control, hyper-vigilance or exaggerated startle response. It studies trauma in the cultural context of which extremity and survival are privileged markers of identity as well in relation to the text. The paper shows the way in which trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication. The paper attempts to explain the device of aporia or the unresolvable paradox in relation to the cultural trauma theory in the context of the text.

Keywords: Trauma, somatic disturbances, psycho-somatic disturbances, memory, flashbacks, dreams, stimuli, temper-control, hyper-vigilance, aporia and paradox.



The representation of trauma in literature has been the focus of intense study. “To be traumatized,” scholar Cathy Caruth asserts “is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 4). Rajinder Singh Bedi’s (1915-1984) “Lajwanti” is based on the violence and upheaval of the landmark historical event of Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The narrative depicts the experience of a local community’s involvement with the activities of the Central Recovery Operation after Partition. The operation was undertaken by the government to recover those women who had been abducted during the migrations that took place and restore them to their original families and communities (Bedi 59).

A central claim of contemporary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity (“Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”). In “Lajwanti”, Sunderlal is an abusive husband whose own wife Lajwanti goes missing during the conflict, actively campaigns for the repatriation of abducted women but is taken aback by the unsettling emotional transformations that attend the return of his own wife. When Lajo returns she was standing before Sunderlal and trembling with hope, despair and fear (Bedi 70). The author raises the problem of silence – the inability of survivors of violence in this case Lajwanti to talk about what happened during her ordeal when she went missing. The author thus silences the protagonist or the victim of the violence Lajwanti (Bedi 59). Moreover, after Lajo’s return to her home her once abusive husband changes his treatment towards her. He venerates her as a “Devi” meaning goddess and does not call her Lajo anymore. It is described thus in the narrative:

... The queen of his home had returned and had filled the emptiness of his soul again. He enshrined Lajo like a golden idol in the temple of his heart and guarded her like a jealous devotee. Lajo, who had once trembled before him, was touched by his unexpected kindness and generosity and slowly began to flourish and blossom.

Sunderlal no longer called her Lajo. He addressed her as “Devi”. (Bedi 71)

The geographic place of traumatic experience and remembrance situate the individual in a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of the self (“Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”). In “Lajwanti” the geographic place of her traumatic experience and remembrance is Pakistan which places her in a larger cultural



context that contains social values such as cohabiting with a man of a different religion which influence the recollection of her abduction during migration. It is depicted in the text in the following way:

Of course soon after her return, Sunderlal had asked Lajwanti about those “dark days.”

“Who was he?”

Lajwanti had lowered her eyes and said, “Jamal”. Then she had raised her eyes apprehensively and looked at Sunderlal. She had wanted to say something more, but the look in his eyes was so strange that she lowered her eyes in silence once more. (Bedi 72)

The reconfiguration of the self of Lajo, a victim of abduction and rape, catapulted her to the status of a “Devi” (Bedi 71) in the consciousness of her husband Sunderlal due to his reformatory zeal.

A traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves related to specific environments (“Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”). This happens in the case of Lajwanti as well. Her cohabitation with Jamal, the Muslim man in Pakistan, in an emergency basically question the moral laws prevalent in a Hindu society which would outcast a woman who has lived with a man of a different religion. Her relationship with her husband undergoes a drastic change as he starts venerating her as a goddess after her return although before her abduction he used to treat her cruelly and beat her brutally. Thus, “Lajo who had once trembled before him, was touched by his unexpected kindness and generosity and slowly began to flourish and blossom” (Bedi71).

Trauma refers to a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. Lajwanti’s response to her abduction and subsequent rape is silence. A trauma text conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or on collective levels. This aspect is depicted in Lajwanti’s fear of losing her beautiful life with her husband. “But he always shrank away from hearing her story, and Lajo felt apprehensive about her new life of love and kindness” (Bedi 71).

A defining feature of the trauma text is the transformation of the self, ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of



memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world (“Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”). In “Lajwanti”, the terrifying experience is the abduction of Lajo, her rape, cohabitation with a Muslim man, Jamal, resulting in a change in Lajo’s self which is displayed in the text at the time of Lajo’s return to Sunderlal:

Sunderlal looked at Lajo. Her head was covered with a red dupatta like a typical Muslim woman, and one end of it was thrown over her left shoulder. She had learned to imitate the women she had lived with in the hope of evading her captors someday. But recently, events had moved so fast – and she had thought of Sunderlal so desperately that she had the time to neither change her clothes nor think about the way she had worn her dupatta. She was in no state of mind to think about the basic differences between Hindu and Muslim culture or worry about whether her dupatta had to be thrown over her left shoulder or her right. She stood before Sunderlal, trembling with hope and despair.... (Bedi 70)

This instance shows the changes that had come in Lajo as a result of her need to survive by camouflaging herself in the alien culture of a hostile environment. It was a terrifying experience for her which made her a survivor who could battle odds to save herself. She was not the same Lajo whom Sunderlal had first seen.

His poor Lajo was a slender, naïve village girl – supple and tender and fresh, like a young mulberry bush! Tanned by the sun, she was full of joyous vitality and restless energy. She moved with the mercurial grace of a drop of dew on a large leaf. When Sunderlal first saw her, he thought that she wouldn’t be able to endure hardships. (Bedi 61)

It is her situations and experiences that have moulded her in a different way making her very strong. Thus, the changed perception of the self. Moreover, the world appears to be harsh, cruel and violent which is not the same safe, secure, warm and comfortable place that it used to be in Sunderlal and Lajo’s home.

The popular trauma theory depends upon the abreactive model of trauma which asserts the experience that traumatic experience produces a temporal gap and a dissolution of the self. Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event. Trauma lies beyond the bounds of normal conception. This Freudian concept of trauma and memory emphasizes the



necessity to recreate or abreact through narrative recall of the experience. The literary trauma theory considers the responses to traumatic experience including cognitive chaos and the possible division of consciousness as an inherent characteristic of traumatic experience and memory. The idea that traumatic experience pathologically divides identity is employed by the literary scholar as a metaphor to describe the degree of damage done to the individual's coherent sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience ("Trends in Literary Trauma Theory"). In "Lajwanti", Lajois not shown to experience a temporal gap as a result of her traumatic experience as she is able to recall her experience with accuracy. Infact, she wants to tell Sunderlal about her experience in Pakistan but he would shrink away from hearing her story.

So that she could feel clean again, she wanted to tell Sunderlal, with tears in her eyes, all that she had suffered. But he always shrank away from hearing her story, and Lajo felt apprehensive about her new life of love and kindness. (Bedi 71)

Moreover, in the text there is evidence related to the accuracy of the representation of trauma through the recreation of the event. Trauma is beyond the bounds of normal conception. The instance of narrative recall relating to Lajwanti's recalling her experience in Pakistan can be seen in the text: "After a pause, she had added, 'He didn't beat me, but I was terrified of him [Jamal]'" (Bedi 72).

There is dissolution of self and the pathological division of identity as a result of the degree of damage done to the individual's sense of self and the change of consciousness caused by the experience. In Lajwanti's case, her identity is metamorphosed into that of a goddess. And so Lajwanti's sorrow remained locked up in her breast. Helplessly, she gazed at her body and realized that, since the Partition, it was no longer hers, but the body of a goddess. (Bedi 72)

The prevalent view of literary studies that "trauma stands outside representation altogether" imagines an intrinsic epistemological fissure between traumatic experience and representation (Caruth 17). This notion of trauma leads to the basic framework of the dominant literary trauma theory best articulated by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* when she says that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature – the way it was



precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). Traumatic experience becomes unrepresentable due to the inability of the brain, understood as the carrier of coherent cognitive schemata, to properly encode and process the event. The origin of traumatic response is forever unknown and unintegrated; yet, the ambiguous, literal event is ever present and intrusive. This theory argues that trauma is only known through repetitive flashbacks that literally re-enact the event because the mind cannot represent it otherwise: “The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (Caruth 17). Traumatic experience is understood as a fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place of the brain, but it maintains the ability to interrupt consciousness and maintains the ability to be transferred to non-traumatized individuals and groups. Moreover, this concept of trauma perceives responses as fundamentally pathologic and privileges the act of speaking or narration as the primary avenue to recovery. In other words, presenting trauma as inherently pathologic perpetuates the notion that all responses to any kind of traumatic experience produce a dissolute consciousness. (“Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”)

In “Lajwanti”, Lajotoo remembers her ordeal through flashbacks and in fragments, “After a pause, she had added, ‘He didn’t beat me but I was terrified of him...’” (Bedi 72). Lajo transfers her traumatic experience to Sunderlal who is a non-traumatized individual through the act of speaking or narration so that she can be on the path to recovery. Sunderlal’s response to the recounting of the traumatic experience of Lajo is that he treats her with excessive kindness, raises her to the status of a goddess as a result Lajo is ecstatic.

... Lajo was deliriously happy. She had never known such joy before. (Bedi 71)

Cathy Caruth’s formulations of trauma and memory, based on the abreactive model and informed primarily by Freud, have become an important source for the theorization of literary trauma studies, especially as a source to support the notion of transhistorical trauma. This form of literary trauma theory makes several important claims about trauma, stating that traumatic experience is repetitious, timeless and unspeakable, yet, it is also a literal,



contagious, and mummified event. Caruth argues that “the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (Caruth 2). Caruth understands external events happening to a pure subject, upon which infectious pathogens wiggle into the mind, take a seat and cause harm. While the experience is isolated in the brain, it still carries the potential to infect another pure and integrated subject through the act of narration, or based upon a shared ancestry or ethnic origins. Caruth suggests that traumatic experience is contagious by stating that trauma “is never simply one’s own [...] [but] precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth 24). This contagion theory of an unidentifiable, yet infectious pathogen leads literary critics such as Caruth to claim that traumatic experience is transhistorically passed across generational gaps, primarily through verbal or written acts of remembering. This standpoint leads to the conclusion by critics such as Kirby Farrell that since traumatic experience is intergenerationally transmitted based on shared social characteristics, then everyone can experience trauma through vicarious means based on one’s ethnic, racial, gender, sexual or economic background, thereby producing a “post-traumatic culture” (Caruth 3). (“Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”)

In “Lajwanti”, the traumatic experience is seen to be repetitious, timeless and unspeakable at the same time it is literal, contagious and a mummified event as the abduction, rape and cohabitation of Lajwanti with Jamal has scarred her psyche which is evident in the unknowing act of the survivor against her own will. “She was afraid that her dream world suddenly be shattered one day, that she would hear the sound of the footsteps of a stranger...” (Bedi 72-73). The fear kept gnawing at her mind as a result of which she wanted to talk to her husband about her ordeal so that she can make a clean breast of whatever has happened to her in Pakistan. Cathy Caruth understands external events happening to a pure subject, upon which infectious pathogens wiggle into the mind, take a seat and cause harm. While the experience is isolated in the brain, it still carries the potential to infect another pure and integrated subject through the act of narration, or based upon a shared ancestry or ethnic origins. In the text, Lajo is the one to whom the harm has been done not only physically but also psychologically as she fears hearing the footsteps of a stranger. Lajo in the



process of recounting her experience to her husband infects him with the traumatic experience the evidence of which is his reaction when Lajo tells him about her cohabitation with Jamal and states that although Jamal had never beaten her but she was fearful of him on the contrary Sunderlal had beaten her severely but she was not fearful of him; “Sunderlal’s eyes had filled with tears, and in a voice full of shame and remorse, he had said, “No, Devi...I shall never beat you again...never...” (Bedi 72)

The concept of trauma as timeless, repetitious, and infectious supports a literary theory of transhistorical trauma by making a parallel causal relationship between the individual and the group as well as between traumatic experience and pathologic responses. The theory indicates that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender group who did not experience the actual event, but because they share social or biologic similarities, the traumatic experience of the individual and group become one. This leads to the claim that trauma narratives can recreate and abreact the experience for those who were not there – the reader, listener, or witness can experience the historical experience first hand (Felman and Laub). Therefore, historical traumatic experience is the source that marks and defines contemporary individual identity as well as racial or cultural identity. (“Trends in Literary Trauma Theory”)

In “Lajwanti”, it is perceived that there is a parallel causal relationship that is forged between the individual and the group as well as between traumatic experience and pathologic responses. In this case, the reader of “Lajwanti” experiences the same kind of trauma or traumatic experience as although the reader who lives much later in time and belongs to the same race, religion, nationality and gender group has not experienced the traumatic experience of the Partition but has a shared sense of the historical past due to the reader’s subject position.

The three different clusters of symptoms related to the traumatic experience is manifested in re-experiencing the traumatic event through the intrusive flashbacks, recurring dreams or later



situations that repeat or echo the original; the second cluster of symptoms shows persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma; and the third cluster of symptoms shows increased arousal including loss of temper-control, hyper-vigilance or exaggerated startle response. “Lajwanti” is a narrative that displays the traumatic experience of Lajwanti, the character, in the first cluster of symptoms in re-experiencing the traumatic event through later situations that repeat or echo the original. The repeat or echo of the original is shown in her recollection of the time that she had spent in Pakistan cohabiting with Jamal. She mentions that although he didn’t beat her she was very afraid of Jamal although she was not fearful of Sunderlal who would beat her regularly.

“He didn’t beat you, did he?”

Lajwanti had leaned back, rested her head against his chest, and replied, “No.” After a pause, she had added, “He didn’t beat me, but I was never afraid of you...You will never beat me again, will you?” (Bedi 72)

In the text, Sunderlal, Lajwanti’s husband, had also experienced trauma when he had been separated from his wife after her abduction during the Partition violence. Thus, he is shown to display the second cluster of symptoms related to the traumatic experience through the persistent avoidance of stimuli. Whenever Lajwanti wants to tell Sunderlal about her experience in Pakistan he repeatedly avoids listening to her.

...So that she could feel clean again, she wanted to tell Sunderlal, with tears in her eyes, all that she had suffered. But he always shrank away from hearing her story, and Lajo felt apprehensive about her new life of love and kindness. (Bedi 71)

She had wanted to say something more, but the look in his eyes was so strange that she lowered her eyes in silence once more. (Bedi 72)

The instances mentioned above show that there is repeated avoidance of stimuli related to the traumatic experience by Sunderlal.

The third cluster of symptoms related to the traumatic experience is loss of temper-control, hyper-vigilance, or exaggerated startle response. Lajwanti who is shown to display hyper-vigilance which is an enhanced state of sensory sensitivity accompanied by an exaggerated intensity of behaviors whose purpose is to detect activity. Hypervigilance can bring about a state of increased



anxiety which can cause exhaustion. Lajwanti displays hypervigilance in two instances:

Sometimes at night, when he slept, she would lean over him and gaze at his face.

Whenever he caught her doing so and asked her for an explanation, she would merely mumble a vague reply, and he would fall back into exhausted sleep... (Bedi 71-72)

...She was afraid that her dream world would suddenly be shattered one day, that she would hear the sound of the footsteps of a stranger... (Bedi 73)

Sunderlal displays an exaggerated startled response when he sees his wife after she is brought back to India from Pakistan:

Sunderlal was shocked. Lajo looked healthier than before. Her complexion seemed clearer and her eyes brighter, and she had put on weight...She looked different from what he had imagined. He had thought that suffering and sorrow would have reduced her to a mere skeleton that she wouldn't have the strength to utter even a few words. He startled to see that she had been well treated in Pakistan. He was puzzled "If she had been comfortable and happy there, why did she agree to return?" he wondered. "Perhaps she has been forced to return by the Indian government..." He didn't, however, say anything to her because he had sworn not to chastise her. (Bedi 70)

Trauma in the cultural context characterizes extremity and survival as privileged markers of identity ("Trends in Literary Trauma Theory"). It is well displayed by the text through Lajwanti's reappearance after her abduction. She has learnt to camouflage her identity in the hope of evading her captors as a result she covered her head with a red dupatta like a typical Muslim woman throwing its one end over her left shoulder. When she is restored to Sunderlal she is unable to think about her clothes

Sunderlal looked at Lajo. Her head was covered with a red dupatta like a typical Muslim woman, and one end of it was thrown over her left shoulder. She had learned to imitate the women she had lived with in the hope of evading her captors someday. But recently, events had moved so fast – and she had thought of Sunderlal so desperately – that she had neither the time to change her clothes nor think about the way she had worn her



dupatta. She was in no state of mind to think about the basic differences between Hindu and Muslim culture or worry about whether her dupatta had to be thrown over her left shoulder or her right. She stood before Sunderlal, trembling with hope and despair... (Bedi 70)

Trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication ("Trends in Literary Trauma Theory"). It is well portrayed in the narrative as Lajwanti was shown to gaze at her body helplessly as she realized that it was no longer hers but that of a goddess. She was happy but apprehensive that someday her dream world will be shattered by the footsteps of a stranger (Bedi72-73). The trauma related to the violation of her body is in relation to the trauma related to the violation of the land as a result of the Partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan. This trauma in both the cases is a result of violence stemming from flawed perceptions and convictions.

The device of aporia or the unresolvable paradox in relation to the cultural trauma theory refers to the fact as stated by Cathy Caruth that the direct witnessing of a traumatic experience may occur as an inability to know it ("Trends in Literary Trauma Theory"). In the context of the text, it is seen that since Lajwanti has been abducted and raped in the melee of the Partition violence she is unable to lead a normal life as she is still scared of a stranger's footsteps from across the border who may end her new found but fragile happiness that she has received after being restored to her husband Sunderlal. Lajo does not realize the fact that the violator/s of her modesty will not come out in the open from across the border to claim her back from her husband. On the other hand, it is also disturbing for Sunderlal to confront his wife regarding her circumstances during the Partition but he keeps suspecting her. He asks her about her co-habitation with Jamal in Pakistan but when she wants to tell him everything to lighten her heart he is not ready to listen. Moreover, he tries to rehabilitate her image by treating her as a goddess but cannot bear to listen to her traumatic ordeal which would provide her an opportunity to unburden herself.

"Lajwanti" is a narrative that focusses on the effects of trauma in the aftermath of Partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan on the characters such as Lajo and Sunderlal. Both are victims of this epoch-making historical event and of the violence and mayhem ensuing from it but



unfortunately, they are unable to relate to each other in the context of their traumatic experiences and are also unable to share the burden of each other. As a result, there is a solipsistic environment in which no meaningful communication occurs. Sunderlal is on a different plane trying to deify Lajowhereas Lajo is scared about losing her home and hearth by the arrival of the man from across the border to shatter her dream world. The life of Lajo and Sunderlal would have crept back to normalcy with time, emotional succor and psychological rehabilitation which would have nullified the pathogens of trauma that were embedded in their memories but that does not happen as they are mentally distant from each other. Lajwanti is shown to re-experience the traumatic event through the intrusive flashbacks, recurring dreams or later situations that repeat or echo the original, persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma and also an exaggerated startle response. Her trauma is akin to the trauma of the nation. Although she is shown to have lived through the traumatic experience but she does not know it accurately.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma." *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser and Piotr Sztompka. University of California Press, 2004. pp. 1-30.
- Balaev, Michelle. "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 41.2, 2008. pp. 149-156.
- Bedi, Rajinder Singh. "Lajwanti." *Literary Vistas* Vol. III. Ed. K. S. Vaishali. Prasaranga Printing Press, 2013. pp. 58-73.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Literature in the Ashes of History*. John Hopkins University Press, 2013.
- "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." *Yale French Studies* 79, 1991. pp. 181-192.
- D., Peraline Priscilla and Rebecca, S. Christina. "Absences and Silences Vocalized: Remembering Trauma in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming Bones*." *Daath Voyage: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English*. Ed. Saikat Banerjee Vol. 3 No. 3 (September), 2018. pp. 45-55.



Daath Voyage

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.3, No.4, December, 2018

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Felman, Shoshana and Laub, Dori. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. Routledge, 1992.

Visser, Irene. "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects." *Humanities* 4, 2015. pp. 250-265.

Tiwari, Vibha and Abha Tiwari. "Premchand's Grasp over Female Psyche as reflected in the persona of his Heroines in *Sevasadanand Nirmala* – A Critical Analysis." *Daath Voyage: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English*. Ed. Saikat Banerjee Vol. 3 No. 3 (September), 2018. pp. 56-57.