
Rape and Trauma: its manifestation and effects in Edwidge Danticat's 'Breath, Eyes, Memory'

Anindita Bose

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sahu Jain P.G. College, Najibabad, U.P.

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Article History

Received : September 15, 2023

Accepted : September 28, 2023

Keywords :

Rape, sexual abuse, trauma,
Rape Trauma
Syndrome(RTS), Post
Traumatic Stress
Disorder(PTSD), suicide,
generational trauma, traumatic
memory.

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to enquire into the nature of trauma and its manifestation in the pivotal characters in Edwidge Danticat's novel 'Breath, Eyes, Memory'. It seeks to delve into a deeper understanding of the physical, psychological and neurobiological effects of Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It also talks about how those who have a history of rape and sexual abuse are disproportionately vulnerable to repeated suicidal behaviours. The paper also talks about the difference between narrative memory and traumatic memory and how the traumatic memory re-emerges in a fragmentary, haphazard way when one aspect of the trauma is triggered. The paper also brings to the fore the generational aspect of trauma; how it passes from one generation to the other. It also enquires into the ways in which a child born as a result of rape and sexual abuse goes through feelings of isolation, guilt and unbelongingness and how their quality of life is affected in adverse ways. The paper focuses primarily on the women of the Caco family and the violence they suffer in a politically unstable and violence-torn Haiti.

Introduction

Edwidge Danticat's 'Breath, Eyes, Memory' is a poignant memoir of the lives of the multi-generational women of the Caco family. It is a heart-wrenching tale of rape, trauma and abuse that Haitian women went through in their violence-ridden motherland. Sophie (the protagonist's) mother is a victim of rape through which she conceives Sophie. The violence of the rape leads to a lifetime of trauma suffered by her mother, ultimately leading to her suicide. The trauma also passes through generations, affecting Sophie's quality of life adversely.

The violence of the act of rape.

"He was a stranger who, when my mother was sixteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school. He dragged her into the cane fields, and pinned her down on the ground...He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up"(Breath Eyes Memory, 139)

These lines in Edwidge Danticat's 'Breath, Eyes, Memory' is a revelation of the rape of the mother of the novel's protagonist by her father.

The violent language used by the author to describe the conception of Sophie(the protagonist) foreshadows the violence associated with her life. Her legacy is tainted with the truth of her birth and haunts her throughout the novel. The fact that she physically doesn't look like any of her ancestors and bears resemblance to her mother's perpetrator, marks her existence with a constant memory of the violent circumstances of her parentage. The effects of the violence of the act of rape- both physical and psychological- therefore gets carried on through generations. In Sophie's mother, it manifests itself as lifelong trauma culminating into madness and her imminent death by suicide. In Sophie, it manifests as alienation from her own mother and an identity crisis leading to self-loathing and shame. The cycle of abuse and its effects break only when Sophie escapes her violence- ridden motherland to New York and has a child with a man who respects and loves her. As a result, the child born has a countenance which echoes Sophie's ancestry and reminds her of all the women in her family who she loves and cherishes.

Rape Trauma syndrome(RTS): definition and symptoms

Rape Trauma Syndrome as a theory was first described by nurse Ann Wolbert Burgess and sociologist Lynda Lytle Holmstrom in 1974."

Rape Trauma Syndrome can be described as a disruption in the normal physical, psychological, emotional and cognitive functioning caused due to rape and it's associated trauma.

According to an article by the Washington University in St. Louis containing information gathered from King County Sexual Assault Resource Center,Rape Crisis Capetown Trust, RAINN; the major symptoms of RTS are:

- Re-Experiencing the Trauma: where the victims may experience nightmares and flashbacks where the traumatic memory of rape is experienced again
- Social Withdrawal: The victims may develop a numbness towards external stimuli and experiences, withdrawing into their own selves where the trauma becomes the dominant stimulus in their day to day life.
- Avoidance Behaviors and Actions: The victims tend to void any mention of the rape or anything that reminds them of it.
- Increased Physiological Arousal Characteristics: The victims may suffer from sleep behaviour disorders, somnambulism, may get startled easily or have difficulty concentrating.

Physical and psychological effects of rape and resultant trauma: how it affects Sophie's mother

Cathy Caruth in her book 'Unclaimed Experience' defines Post Traumatic Stress Disorder(PTSD) as that it “reflects the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiologically, by an event that it cannot control”(Unclaimed Experience 58). Sophie's mother's trauma is a result of her getting violently raped by a masked man(thought to be one of the soldiers under the Duvalier regime in Haiti) and her pregnancy with Sophie when she was just young girl. The act of the rape and the unpreparedness for it, causes a breach in the consciousness, a breakdown of the safety net against violent stimulus, which in result causes the act to be stored as a traumatic memory in the mind of the victim; in this case, Sophie's mother.

The physical effects of trauma become more pronounced when she is back in Haiti. Sophie observes that her mother's face turns purple and she becomes visibly sick: " It's my discomfort with being in Haiti. I want to go back there only to be buried". (Breath Eyes Memory, 179)

The recurring nightmare that Sophie's mother has since her getting raped is the most pronounced psychological manifestation of the violence perpetrated on her. She shows all symptoms of PTSD which in her case gets worse as time goes on and ultimately results in her suicide.

The first night that Sophie spends with her mother when she leaves Haiti to go live with her in New York, is the first time she witnesses the trauma that her mother's rape has caused. A young Sophie lying in her bed in her mother's apartment in New York the very first time, gets startled as she hears a voice screaming which she discovers is her mother's voice, as she is screaming and thrashing against her sheets in her sleep.

When Sophie is grown up and reconciled with her mother, she tells Sophie about the actual nature of her nightmares and its effects on her, " the nightmares I thought they would fade with age, but no, its like getting raped every night."(190).

Ted Morrissey in his ' Trauma Theory as an Approach to Analyzing Literary Texts' talks about a difference between Narrative Memory and Traumatic Memory. Narrative Memory is of an ordered and linear nature that corresponds to a logical sequence of events and helps make sense out of everyday experience. Traumatic experience causes a disruption in the security net that protects the consciousness from excess stimuli and therefore, traumatic memory unlike narrative memory does not adhere to a set of pre existing mental constructor mental schema. Traumatic Memory, unlike narrative memory is stored under abnormal circumstances and therefore cannot be retrieved voluntarily or under normal functioning of the memory system. Narrative Memory functions in a framework of conscious selection and omissions. Depending on the social situation of the narration, the narrator has the opportunity to be selective as to inclusion, exclusion or the emphasis that he puts on details. In the case of traumatic memory, however the framework of conscious selection and omission fails to function. "With traumatic memory, when one element of a traumatic experience is evoked, all other elements follow automatically. They follow automatically, but not sequentially or logically, rather in haphazard fragmentary form"(33). The latent and fragmentary nature of the traumatic memory therefore triggers a neurosis in Sophie's mother which makes her relive the memory every night as a nightmare. The traumatic memory is not manifested in a logical or sequential manner, or in a state of active consciousness or a controlled environment as is the case in narrative memory, rather it is manifested in an uncontrolled state and in a fragmentary form. It also leads to a sleep- behaviour disorder in Sophie's mother where she hurts herself violently in her sleep during one of her nightmares. Once she even ends up choking her boyfriend Marc in her sleep.

Cathy Caruth in her work 'Unclaimed Experience' explains that the repetition of the trauma experienced in the flashback or in nightmares can i be retraumatizing in itself; if not life-threatening. The repetition of the traumatic experience is threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration. (Unclaimed Experience 63). Sophie's mother's nightmares is a constant reenactment of the rape and violence she suffered as a young girl. The nightmares not only hampers her quality of life by isolating her from her loved ones, it also leads to a significant deterioration in her mental capacity over time. She loses out on the hope to ever get better and lead a normal life. By the end of the novel, a duality comes in herself. One is a pretend reality, a calm, composed front that she puts up in front of her loved ones; and the other her actual reality, a self that is constantly plagued by the trauma of her rape.

The trauma takes up so much space in her life that it governs the way she makes interpersonal connections. When Sophie asks her mother if she actually likes sleeping with her boyfriend Marc she says that she pretends that she likes it: " It's like eating grapefruit. I was tired of being alone. If that's what I had to do to have someone wake me up at night, I would do it." (Breath Eyes Memory,191)

At a narrative juncture in the novel when Sophie is still estranged from her mother, Danticat gives a penetrating insight into the physical and psychological trauma and distress Sophie's mother went through after being raped. For months, Sophie's mother was afraid that the rapist would come and kill her in her sleep. At night, she used to hurt herself, bite and tearing off pieces of her own flesh. (139) Sophie's grandmother sent her mother to a rich mulatto family to cook and clean while she was pregnant. She came back to Dame Marie after Sophie was born and when Sophie was a baby, she tried several times to kill herself.

Sophie's mother's suicidal tendencies is a very common effect of her rape and the trauma associated with it. There is a correlation between many types of trauma and suicidal behaviours. According to a study conducted by the National Library of Medicine, where a sample of 158 female suicide attempters aged 20 years or older were studied, it was concluded that within a group of female suicide attempters, those with a history of sexual abuse and rape were more vulnerable to repeated suicidal behaviours and tendency to self harm.

Her pregnancy with Marc's child triggers all the latent memories of her violent rape and pregnancy with Sophie. She feels that her unborn child is a boy and when she gives birth to him he will have the same face as his rapist. The rape has left such deep psychological wounds on her, that she thinks that she is also physically altered by it. She feels that her womb has been forever altered by that act and it still has some hostile seed in it so if she gives birth to a boy, it might bear resemblance to her rapist: "What if there is something left in me and when the child comes out it has that other face"(217)

Morrissey in his work 'Trauma Theory as an Approach to Analyzing Literary Texts says "One of the long-term effects of trauma is a dramatically altered worldview." Victims of trauma look at life through a an altered lens. They think they are more susceptible to misfortunate incidents and suffering. The traumatic experience that is left reconciled in their memory colours all new ideas and experience and alters it in negative ways, that itself might again evoke an aspect of the original traumatic experience. (31) Sophie's mother's pregnancy, might be a source of blessing for other people, a cause of celebration for her close ones like Marc and Sophie but for her, it becomes a source of paralysing fear. The happy

circumstance of conceiving and birthing a child turns into a haunting reenactment of the pain and suffering caused by the rape and her pregnancy with Sophie.

Morrissey explains that traumatic memory can hamper the storage and retrieval of later untraumatic experiences if it is left unreconciled. Memory is an active and constructive process and memory is dependant on the pre existing mental schema. These pre existing schemes are that what helps make sense of new experiences and stimuli. The traumatic experience, however does not correspond with these pre existing schemes, precisely because of the 'unpreparedness' surrounding the traumatic experience. Morrissey talks about the vulnerability of victims of trauma to stress and anxiety as a result of the re emergence of the trauma or when any aspect of the trauma is evoked which leads to an involuntary retrieval of the traumatic memory. The previously unreconciled traumatic memory therefore attaches itself with new experiences and ideas resulting in the formation of flexible mental schemas. "Flexible mental schemas are the untrue “memories” or fantasies/delusions that PTSD sufferers generate unbidden"(Morrissey, 33) . As Sophie's mother continues with her pregnancy with her and Marc's child, the delusions get stronger. The traumatic memory is no longer latent or repressed like earlier, coming out only as nightmares, but actually starts haunting her in wakefulness. The memory becomes so profound that it leads to hallucinations. She actually starts visualising her rapist, seeing him in every man: " the rapist. I see him everywhere...I feel his other hand creeping up my thighs, his hair smelling like aftershave as his face approached mine". (Breath Eyes Memory, 199)

Sophie gives voice to the dangerous extent of the resurfacing trauma of her mother caused by her second pregnancy. She speaks to her therapist about her mother and the recurring nightmares that she has and how being pregnant again has made them more pronounced to the point of pushing her to the verge of insanity. Sophie says of her mother's condition:

"Twenty- five years of getting raped every night. Could you live with that? This child makes the feelings stronger. It takes her back to a time when she was carrying me. Even the time she was living with me. That's why she is trying to get the child out of her body"(Breath Eyes Memory 219)

Sophie's mother's condition finally drives her to suicide where in a symbolical act she stabs herself 17 times in her stomach, killing herself and her unborn child, in an attempt to break out of the cycle of trauma and violence that she had been living with since getting raped.

How the trauma of her mother's rape is passed on to Sophie and the effects it has on her life.

An article by the ' Trauma and Mental Health Report' by Robert T. Muller titled 'Children born of rape face a painful legacy' states that the children born out of rape often develop poor parent-child

relationships, because the violent rape hampers the mother's capacity to care for the child and develop a healthy maternal bond with the child. The mother's inability to care for the child can often lead to abusive parenting and neglect. The children can suffer from feelings of guilt and embarrassment and also helplessness due to their father's actions.

The very circumstance of Sophie's birth and its associations with violence, rape and a resulting lifelong trauma suffered by her mother alters Sophie's existence in adverse ways. The first pernicious effect is that after Sophie's birth, she is alienated from her own mother because of her mother's temporary insanity and suicidal instincts. The alienation from her birth giver and by extension her closest family, is symbolically presented in the novel as Sophie bearing no resemblance to any of them. This fact is brought up time and again in the novel and situates Sophie's birth and existence as something out of the realm of normal.

Sophie after seeing a picture of herself as a baby observes:

"I had never seen an infant picture of myself, but somehow I knew that it was me...I looked for traces in the child, a feature that was my mother's but still mine too. It was the first time in my life that I noticed that I looked like no one in my family. Not my mother. Not my Tante Atie. I did not look like them when I was a baby and I did not look like them now." (Breath Eyes Memory 45)

She is brought up by her aunt Tante Atie while her mother leaves Haiti for America. A young Sophie therefore grows up without parents and under the guardianship of her maiden aunt. When Sophie is 12 years old she is unwillingly displaced from everything familiar(from her Aunt and Haiti) and is moved to America to live with her mother.

After Sophie's mother accidentally gets pregnant with her boyfriend's child later in life, when Sophie is married and a mother herself, she admits to Sophie about the numerous attempts that were made to kill Sophie while she was in the womb. Sophie's mother tells her that Sophie's grandmother made her mother drink all sorts of baby poisons like quinine, verbane, verbane to kill the child in the womb. Sophie's mother used to beat her stomach with wooden spoons to kill the child.

The knowledge of her being an unwanted child, of being a painful remainder of the terrible crime on her mother, leads to a lifetime of guilt and shame that Sophie has to deal with. It also leads to an alienation from her own mother and a severe identity crisis.

Sophie, like her mother suffers from suicidal tendencies. The trauma generated from her mother's rape therefore permeates into Sophie's life as well. Sophie recounts she used to have suicidal thoughts in the first year that her and Joseph got married. She used to dream of a man with no facepounding a life in to

a girl. Sophie used to think that she has probably caught her mother's anxieties and fears from living with her for a long time and she used to wake up in the morning wondering whether both her and her mother had the same nightmare the previous night.(193).

Sophie's life too therefore is ridden with the effects of the trauma that her mother suffered. She has the same nightmares as her mother, develops eating disorders and has intimacy issues with her husband. The unchangeable fact that Sophie is a child born out of rape and not a healthy, consensual relationship colours Sophie's story and all those connected to her.

The novel concludes with the protagonist's final attempt to unshackle herself and the posterity from the generational trauma of rape and abuse that is the lot of the women belonging to her motherland. Unable to save her mother from the ghosts of the past, Sophie resorts to an active act of violence on her part for the very first time in her life, when she runs wild into the cane fields (the very same cane fields where like countless other girls her mother was raped and Sophie was conceived). When after her mother's funeral Sophie attacks and pounds the cane stalks violently, she frees herself and her posterity from the trauma her mother suffered getting raped amidst the cane fields. Sophie's lot is different from her mother only in the way that she marries and has a child in a safe, loving and respectful relationship with Joseph. This also helps her to break the cycle of trauma and raise her daughter in a healthy nurturing environment. Her hope for her daughter's freedom from the trauma suffered by both her mother and her is expressed as Sophie reflects on her daughter sleeping peacefully and observes that the child sleeps a lot which would mean that she doesn't have any nightmares and can actually grow up to live a healthy, normal life outside of the cycle of trauma that otherwise has all the female members of her family in its clutches.

Works Cited:

1. Caruth, Cathy. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History". John Hopkins University Press. United States of America. 1996
2. Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Abacus. Great Britain. 1996
3. Morissey, Ted. "Trauma Theory as an Approach to Analyzing Literary Texts". Twelve Winters Press. 2021
4. Muller, Robert T. "Children born of rape face a painful legacy", *The Trauma and Mental Health Report*, <https://trauma.blog.yorku.ca/2016/01/children-born-of-rape-face-a-painful-legacy/>
5. "Rape Trauma Syndrome", health and wellness, relationship and sexual violence prevention center, Washington University in St. Louis, <https://students.wustl.edu/rape-trauma-syndrome/>



6. "Rape Trauma syndrome". Wikipedia, Wikimedia foundation, 29 May, 2023,https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape_trauma_syndrome