

# TAYR

## QUARTERLY

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TRAUMA IN FOCUS  
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# TAYR

## QUARTERLY



### About TAYR Quarterly

TAYR Quarterly (ISSN 2382-2872. Impact Factor 0.805) is an indexed journal that publishes all kinds of scientific research in English Language Literature, and Civilization conducted by young researchers from all over the globe. All articles, Research Letters, and papers published are reviewed by a committee of young researchers in the first phase and then edited by an eminent researcher. TAYR Quarterly is totally free and open access to all TAYR members.

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- The manuscript appeals to the general interests of TQ's readership.
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- manuscript (8,500 words)
- tables
- figures
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Special Issue on TRAUMA IN FOCUS

Guest Editor: Prof. Mounir Triki

Editor-in-Chief: Mimoun Melliti

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# The Origin of Trauma in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

By Dr. Nouredine Fekir  
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## Abstract:

In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow's psychic wound has always been attributed to his sudden encounter with the evil of the West as embodied in Kurtz and the corrupt managers he met on his way to achieve his mission. This aggressive encounter would later be displaced into a tale he would narrate to an audience of veterans that include the first narrator and Conrad as the overarching author. This paper examines the root of the traumatic narrative and suggests that the description of Marlow's meeting with Kurtz in the deepest recesses of the jungle is not in the long run caused by the realization that colonialism was a filthy enterprise, for this would be a naïve statement made by Marlow, the now initiated Buddha, as well as by Conrad himself, but by a more deepened scar triggered in Conrad's troubled vision of life as such and by his vain search for the truth. The last scenes of the novel are so meticulously depicted that they give the impression Marlow was attending an initiation rite very similar to those organized by secret societies in different parts of the world such as Egypt, South America, Greece and even in the so called modern world. The paper shows how Conrad was not only addressing a critique to the Imperialist system, but also reflecting his confused state that resulted from his inability to construct a coherent vision of life, its origin, and the destination of Man in the universe. Whilst *Heart of Darkness* may be read as a form of introspection into the evil humans do, it must be equally read as a traumatic account that was delivered by a disjunctive and ambivalent mind which saw fiction as the only refuge of man in a world that was beginning to relinquish belief in all grand narratives.

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This paper is not about trauma, its workings and effects but about the origin and the cause of what psychologically affected Marlow in Joseph's Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The book was actually written to displace the sequels of the author's trauma even as it unconsciously pointed to its origin. Marlow, who is Conrad's mask, keeps referring to the internal wound more than to the physical damage, but even so he is used only because

Conrad himself could not speak the unspeakable, for trauma can never be allowed to surface in a conspicuous manner.<sup>1</sup>

This is then an inquiry about the heart of the matter in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. It involves a questioning of the reasons behind writing the book in the way it was written. The high level of introspection, reflection and the ambivalent language used in the description of Marlow's state of mind should make the reader very suspicious of the origins behind writing about the Congo. Most readers have associated that intention with condemning the rather unsound methods used by the Europeans in their exploitation of the African continent, and though this is undeniably one of the main manifest and declared aims of the writer, as is made clear by Marlow on many occasions of his tale, the fact remains unclear as to why Conrad uses Marlow to deliver his account and to bear the burden of the trauma.

It is my contention that any reader of the novella cannot fail to perceive the innumerable references to darkness whether that applies to the title itself, to the bush, to the heart of Kurtz, to the misty atmosphere, to memory or to the inappropriateness of language in rendering what the soul of man could not handle, namely death and what Kurtz called the Horror.

If Conrad calls his book *Heart of Darkness*, it is basically to guide the reader to a certain propensity in the human heart to do evil when man feels most empowered, when he acquires the status of a deity, as is the case with Kurtz whose voice and rhetoric have had the power to subdue not only the Africans but also the Whites who have approached him including Marlow, the Russian and the Intended.

Yet it is the image and nature of this deity which I seek to question in the paper. Critics have merely pointed to how Kurtz was considered as a god, but they have never investigated the matter thoroughly. The text seems to shed light on this issue as when it refers to the halo offered to Kurtz by the tribesmen and by his mistress herself. As Marlow approaches the inner station where Kurtz is found, he describes the mistress as follows:

She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. A whole minute passed, and then she made a step forward. There was a low jingle, a glint of yellow metal, a sway of fringed draperies, and she stopped as if her heart had failed her. The young fellow by my side growled. The pilgrims murmured at my back. She looked at us all as if her life had depended upon the

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<sup>11</sup>Trauma is that which cannot be expressed in words is the main thesis of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*

unswerving steadiness of her glance. Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head, as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer into a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene. 'She turned away slowly, walked on, following the bank, and passed into the bushes to the left. Once only her eyes gleamed back at us in the dusk of the thickets before she disappeared. (*Heart of Darkness*127)

It is clear that the sense of self-control which the mistress displays in the above scene enacts a ritualistic undertaking. The way she moves forward, how she opens her arms and throws them up in the sky are evocative of a desire to enter into a deep communion with the forces she worships. The silence which Marlow describes as 'formidable' conveys a serene affect found only in ceremonials of death or worship. Later in the novel, after Kurtz has been taken by Marlow's group, the same woman comes back to the scene and reiterates the rite of worship but this time to end the 'satanic litany' (139) that was murmured by the crowd. Marlow is alert to the choice of words as he states:

the woman with helmeted head and tawny cheeks rushed out to the very brink of the stream. She put out her hands, shouted something, and all that wild mob took up the shout in a roaring chorus of articulated, rapid, breathless utterance. Only the barbarous and superb woman did not so much as flinch, and stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the sombre and glittering river. (140-42)

Marlow never misses a chance to ascribe a touch of ritualistic splendour on the precocious act of mourning the ominous death of the god of the tribe, for it is clear that the community is guided by the gestures of the goddess or priestess who has offered herself to the god. The fact that she 'tragically' lays bare her arms indicates that she is aware of the imminent death of the god/king. As Marlow's boat recedes farther from the tribesmen into the somber river, the scene becomes reminiscent of how the effigy of Frazer's god is carried over by the current into the infinite world of eternity where the god is sacrificed to redeem those who are still alive.

However, the text apparently hides another issue which Conrad himself only hinted at and never dared to openly raise. By using Marlow, Conrad is able to show the voice of a humanist who at times rationalizes the whereabouts he is traversing. At other times, Marlow ambivalently hints to the existence of some hidden secret or force that is seemingly related to the idea of the occult. Even if one concedes that Marlow does not seem to understand what is happening, Conrad certainly does or else why would he have used so many allusions to these rituals and why did he ascribe on Marlow a touch

of wisdom after that experience in the heart of Africa? Marlow is described sitting in the “pose of a Buddha preaching in European clothes and without a lotus flower’ (9). This is the first hint to the wisdom of the East and to the possibility that Conrad is referring to the way Marlow has, after his experience in the Congo, become an adept of the initiation rites because he has been transformed into a wiser being. Marlow keeps seeing evil spirits everywhere and interprets everything he comes across accordingly. As he sees the Congo river, he does not hesitate a single moment to compare it to a snake. Marlow first states that “the snake had charmed’ him (12) and on his arrival to the Congo, he proclaims that “the river was there—fascinating—deadly—like a snake” (17). Why does Conrad insist on comparing the river to a snake? Is this a mere symbolic gesture on the part of the writer or does he seek to associate the whole experience undergone by Marlow with the temptation that will lure Kurtz, namely the love of ivory and glory? As a matter of fact, Marlow never ponders musingly enough on the deepest reaches of the Kurtzian project, a project which on the surface level revolves around the greedy collection of the highest amount of ivory but which in truth embraces the human desire to become god, or at least to experiment with what it means to be a god.

Another instance of how Marlow further hinges on mysterious forces occurs when in the bush, he encounters a man who “had tied a bit of white worsted around his neck. Why? Where did he get it? Was it a badge—an ornament—a charm—a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas.” (32). This is a scene which has largely been neglected by most readers of the text. Why does Marlow, or rather, Conrad, for that matter, give importance to this minute detail in the story? The fact that he sees a man wearing a piece of wool seems to be of no functional value to the development of the story. Nevertheless, it is worth pausing here on the series of questions asked by Marlow? Why does Marlow want to know the origin of the ‘worsted’? The fact that this ‘worsted’ may be associated with propitiation evokes the possibility of some secret ritual of worship that is based on invoking superior forces. What is striking here is that Marlow keeps asking questions as to the source of this worsted that is apparently used like an amulet to ward off evil. Oddly enough, the episode is suddenly brought to a close and it is never mentioned again. Undoubtedly, the reference to the worsted does have a symbolic meaning, for this may serve as an omen for what Marlow will encounter when he reaches Kurtz.

This scene of the man wearing a worsted should, however, not be solely associated with the occult rituals which Marlow would subsequently see but with the previous scene of the women knitting black wool. A worsted is obviously a piece of yarn wool and it is very strange to find it in the midst of the bush of Africa. It is for this reason that Marlow is amazed because though he does not say it explicitly, he knows that this

product can only come 'from beyond the seas' i.e. from Europe where the techniques of spinning wool were becoming more and more sophisticated. Marlow's description of the two women in the Belgian company is also weird, for he dwells on that episode in a striking manner. However, the puzzling meaning of the wool and the presence of the women in the premises of the Company can easily be solved if we see how Conrad wants to associate the company itself with the Kurtzian project, and hint to some sort of occult enterprise that would bind the Africans to devil worship as embodied in Kurtz. Marlow himself is made uneasy by the way one of the two women looked at him:

She seemed to know all about them and about me, too. An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. AVE! Old knitter of black wool. MORITURI TE SALUTANT. Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again—not half, by a long way. (18)

One can only wonder at the real reason behind their presence in the company if not because the company itself is involved in perpetuating the pagan rites of the past in order to further dominate the Africans and enslave them. There is in my view no way to explain Marlow's reference to these two episodes that mention wool except by stating that Conrad wanted to show that the Company in complicity with Kurtz and was using secret and esoteric rites in order to facilitate the domination of the Africans in that part of the world.

It is clear that Conrad wishes to track down a line of pagan rituals in his novel. To do this, he takes the reader back to the origins of life, to the period when man, the king was elevated to the status of a god, and was thus venerated and worshipped. Conrad had probably either seen this in some of his journeys around the world or at least read about it in *The Golden Bough*, written by the British anthropologist Sir James Gordon Frazer. Frazer collected hundreds of stories about the god kings who were worshipped by their tribesmen but soon after any of these kings started to age or to become impotent, he was sacrificed so that he may not disgrace or plague the community. This is because the divine was expected to remain perfect and for this reason the ailing god king had to be replaced. The replacement of Kurtz could thus be read in two ways: either he is sacrificed by the African bushmen themselves, for they are the ones who apparently still believe in those primitive rituals as described by Frazer and are the ones who deified him. In this line of interpretation, Conrad was not being a racist as Chinua Achebe claimed, but an anthropologist in Frazer's manner, for he was merely reporting one of the rituals which date back to the prehistoric age and which have been perpetuated till



the present age. The second interpretation concerning Kurtz's sacrifice is that Conrad sees that the Europeans themselves in their imperialistic greed and grandeur had resorted to the practice of magic and occult practices and had eventually aspired to push the most adept of their administrators to become deities by subjugating all the tribes to their will.

It is for this reason that Conrad places Marlow in situations where he hears or overhears statements about Kurtz who was said to be endowed with special gifts and to be destined to become a very influential person in the company. When Marlowe arrives to the main station, the chief accountant tells him:

When you see Mr. Kurtz.....tell him from me that everything here'— he glanced at the deck—' is very satisfactory. I don't like to write to him—with those messengers of ours you never know who may get hold of your letter—at that Central Station.' He stared at me for a moment with his mild, bulging eyes. 'Oh, he will go far, very far,' he began again. 'He will be a somebody in the Administration before long. *They, above—the Council in Europe, you know—mean him to be.*'(36) [italics mine]

Why does the Council want Kurtz to rise in status if not because he is a member of a secret society and is in line with the beliefs propagated by these entrepreneurs who wish to control the soul and the body alike? Kurtz produced better results than all the other ivory collectors together because he addressed the heart of the natives and spoke to them not in their own tongue which he did not master but through the use of their own symbology, a system of belief that has been circulating for thousands of years. Marlow observes that Kurtz 'had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour;" (104). Clearly, Kurtz was gifted to the extent that he knew how to initiate other souls into paganistic forms of worship.

Before illustrating the issue of pagan worship, it is important here to report the conversation overheard by Marlow while he was in the main station. Hidden in the boat, Marlow saw the manager approaching and talking to his nephew. Marlow reports that the uncle said,

He has asked the Administration to be sent there,' said the other, 'with the idea of showing what he could do; and I was instructed accordingly. Look at the influence that man must have. Is it not frightful?' They both agreed it was frightful, then made several bizarre remarks: '*Make rain and fine weather—one man—the Council—by the nose—* bits of absurd sentences that got the better of my drowsiness, so that I had pretty near the whole of my wits about me(62)[Italics mine].



The conversation indeed seems bizarre, and the fact that Marlow reports it is even weirder. Does this have to do with Frazer's god king who "has it in his power to make the rain to fall, the sun to shine and the fruits of the earth to grow"? (Frazer 203). The manager and his nephew were evidently talking about Kurtz who have indeed adopted many of the markers associated with such pagan gods and which were part of the beliefs that still circulate among all tribes of the world even in the twentieth century.

One such belief which Conrad seems to have been aware of or which he seems to have read about in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*<sup>2</sup> is that trees themselves could be worshipped as incarnations of the sources of life. Marlow voices such a belief when he states that the journey "up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the *big trees were kings*. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish." [Italics mine](67). The golden bough itself, as Frazer reveals in his book, is a sacred bough that stands for the sacred link between the divine, the vegetative and the human. Marlow's phrase that the 'trees were kings' has no other explanation but the assumption that trees were living beings. In Frazer's words: 'They have heard it from their fathers that (forest trees are animate) the tree feels the cut no less than a wounded man his hurt' (*Golden Bough* 272). Conrad who had much travelled around the world and had most clearly been acquainted with pagan worship, whether through Frazer<sup>3</sup> or during his journeys, did not just use such references to pagan practices with a view to creating a context for his novella, but wanted such details to be at the core of Kurtz's project and politics.

Kurtz is indeed at the heart of such a project which is based on subjugating the colonized by making use of whatever means including taking advantage of the indigenes' belief in superstition, witchcraft and paganism. Wherever he goes, Kurtz leaves a trace that testifies to his ritualistic and paganist approach to life. In the central station, Marlow sees a 'small sketch in oil. He is told that Kurtz is the author of this painting which shows 'a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch. The background was sombre—almost black. The movement of the woman was stately, and the effect of the torchlight on the face was sinister.' (*Heart of Darkness* 48) This image is reminiscent of Diana, the Queen of Nemi and the goddess of fertility holding a torch in her grove (*Golden Bough* 12). Kurtz is not just an artist who paints for the sake of painting, but is deeply obsessed with the fertility myths and pagan rituals of the past, which he seeks to revive in the midst of the jungle either because he personally believes in them or

<sup>2</sup>The Golden Bough first appeared in 1890 so Conrad must have had time to read it before he wrote his novel.

<sup>3</sup>In his article on Frazer's Golden Bough, Shane Donaldson says, 'Commentators have discussed the relationships between Frazer and his contemporaries who dabbled in related areas within their varied fields, particularly Joseph Conrad, Branislav Malinowski' see : <https://shanedonaldson.wordpress.com/the-golden-bough/>

because he considers, along with the company, that this is the best means for controlling the natives.

Marlow is an ambivalent character in that he never manages to judge what he experiences and speaks always in obscure terms, thus reinforcing the darkness that looms over the whole tale and the continent. The difficulty to spell out in clear terms what is going on is perhaps due to the sequels of his traumatic experience undergone right before and after the death of Kurtz. It is noteworthy that Marlow's ambivalence and his instability reflect Conrad who was going through severe psychological crises before and after writing his book.<sup>4</sup>An example of Marlow's ambivalent language can be illustrated in the following passage:

It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it— this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity— like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of *there being a meaning in it* which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. And why not? *The mind of man is capable of anything—because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage—who can tell?— but truth—truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder—the man knows, and can look on without a wink. But he must at least be as much of a man as these on the shore. He must meet that truth with his own true stuff— with his own inborn strength. Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags— rags that would fly off at the first good shake. No; you want a deliberate belief. An appeal to me in this fiendish row—is there? Very well; I hear; I admit, but I have a voice, too, and for good or evil mine is the speech that cannot be silenced.* (72-73)

Marlow's ambivalence is reflected in his fragmented rhetoric. He keeps using disconnected sentences which he alone seems to understand and he never finishes his thoughts. In other words, Marlow's narrative is fraught with allusions, though at the end of the above passage he claims that he cannot be silenced and that he will speak the

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<sup>4</sup>See C.B.Cox, Joseph Conrad and the Question of Suicide :

<https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/api/datastream?publicationPid=uk-ac-man-scw:1m2768&datastreamId=POST-PEER-REVIEW-PUBLISHERS-DOCUMENT.PDF>

whole truth. Nevertheless, this truth is unspeakable because the attempt of the subject to let the Real, to use Lacan's term for the unconscious, resurface always fails. Marlow remains ambivalent because he cannot take a stand against the demonic practices of Kurtz and the company. This is due to the fact that he himself is somewhat seduced by the idea. His amazement at the man's powers and personality is a facet of this seduction.

The following statement made by Marlow clearly shows that he was very ambivalent in assessing Kurtz's real problem.

Everything belonged to him— but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible—it was not good for one either—trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land— I mean literally. You can't understand. How could you?— (100)

The fact that Kurtz owned the land did not matter to Marlow. What troubled more the narrator is the question of who owned Kurtz. One needs here to draw a parallel between Kurtz and Dr. Faustus to understand the significance of Marlow's remark that what mattered 'was to know what he belonged to'. What Marlow implies is that Kurtz had sold his soul to the devil who now owns it, and it is in this sense that Conrad can be understood as having recreated the image of the modern Faustus who is using his gifts not to attain a sublime end but to achieve material fulfillment through the cultic worship of the self and the collection of ivory.

Marlow keeps referring to Kurtz as somebody who is 'assaulted by the powers of darkness' (101), for he 'made a bargain for his soul with the devil' (101) who after having lost his nerves, started "to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which—as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times—were offered up to him— do you understand?—to Mr. Kurtz himself." (102). Marlow describes the whole scene surrounding the end of Kurtz and depicts the tribesmen who

stamped their feet, nodded their horned heads, swayed their scarlet bodies; they shook towards the fierce riverdemon a bunch of black feathers, a mangy skin with a pendent tail—something that looked a dried gourd; they shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany." (140)

Clearly Marlow describes the whole episode as a ritual ceremony of the dead taking place on the banks of the riverdemon. The fact that the dancers wear horns on their heads associates their sounds with what he calls a 'satanic litany'.

In the above, I have shown that the *Heart of Darkness* is a novel that uses Marlow as a smokescreen for Conrad's beliefs about the occult. The novel is in this both an actualization of the anthropological beliefs circulated by Frazer in his *Golden Bough* and an expression of the unconscious impulses which have been repressed in the author's psyche after his suicidal attempt. This means that Conrad was himself divided and excessively affected by the traumas he experienced in his life. Writers who have undertaken to explore the heart of darkness have ineluctably been found to attempt to voice their beliefs about the mysterious forces shared by different nations in the world, namely the prince of darkness. Yet such writers have always attempted to conceal their beliefs behind a narrative voice that claims it is humanist and rationalist.

It is easy to show that Conrad used Marlow to maintain the facet of the rationalist who refuses to sink into the underworld by proclaiming a judgment on the excessive greed of the imperialist project and its dehumanization of the Africans. Nevertheless, not much has been written on the novel regarding this issue, as Marlow turns the attention to Kurtz, the king/god. Kurtz does not dominate the Africans with force, as may be seen in the figure of the Mistress who clearly seems subdued by his divine status. However, he does use force: those that dare question his authority are called rebels, instead of criminals and that makes all the difference. They rebelled against his rule as a monarch whereas the chained men Marlow describes upon his arrival to the main station are called criminals. What Conrad seeks to show is that the tyranny of Imperialism has existed in different guises ever since the birth of mankind. The words of horror (145) pronounced by Kurtz are not just about the Western Horror, as Philippe Lacouelabarthe proclaimed in his seminal essay about *Heart of Darkness* but are about man throughout all ages. Marlow explicitly states that Kurtz is a remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth (146). The story is, therefore, not about imperial exploitation but about the way men will always seek to activate the darkness in their heart when they find weaker selves around them.

Nevertheless, one should ask the following question: Why does Conrad conceal this first through the use of Marlow and second through the ambivalent language. Each time he tries to point the status of divinity Kurtz has sought to maintain, Marlow interferes to censor and make his ironic judgments about the ivory that was collected and looted. The story is not about ivory but about trauma and its origin. Why does Conrad repress himself by not allowing Marlow to reveal the origin of trauma? Is it because Conrad himself is traumatized and is really unable to denounce what Marlow

has seen because he himself is seduced by the idea. Divinity is not an end in itself here, but it is the idea of immortality. How does one experience death? Is there anything behind death? Marlow toys with death and keeps repeating that he has been on the verge of this experience twice. This is because Conrad knows that becoming a god is the key to immortality and this he has certainly learned from experimental attempts practiced in sacrificial rites, which rites are mainly inspired by demonic spirits and which keep haunting his writing as those “va(r)nishedsp(i)rits” that are referred to in the first paragraph of the novella. The rites teach that death is the path towards immortality. Did Conrad aspire to become immortal through his writing or through his ambivalent belief in such death rituals?

If Marlow associates the Horror merely with the enterprise of colonial exploitation and greed, why should he be seduced by Kurtz in the final stance and why should he remain loyal to him? If the horror is so abject, why should Marlow keep it in his mind for so long, long after the Intended had remained in her mourning clothes? What has Marlow discovered? In what way has he been initiated into a seer? As a sailor he must have seen so many atrocities around the world, but in the Congo something has shocked him, and that can only be due to the satanic rituals of secret societies practiced around the four corners of the globe ever since mankind started to people the world in tribal communities.

It seems that Conrad himself did not manage to articulate the signified behind the idea of the Horror. Could it be that which all men and artists have lost and striven to recuperate? The Horror is not a description of the plunder but is that which haunted all great writers, including Shakespeare, Goethe, Keats and Yeats, namely death and what can be done to overcome it. Some may even try to become gods. If Kurtz is terrified, it is because he sought to defeat death in becoming a god. Is Kurtz not the Faustian character that Conrad made and whom he could no longer control?

All this takes us to the many horned shapes described intermittently and hazily by Marlow himself. The horns of an antelope he says and in many instances of the novel Marlow refers to occult descriptions very similar to the rites found in death ceremonies. Conrad knew certainly about secret societies and the rituals performed in worship of Satan or his representatives.

It is all too clear that Conrad used Marlow the humanist to condemn the Western horror, for the narrator does not cease to express his uneasiness with anything he sees on his journey. Nevertheless, Marlow is also used to express Conrad's ambivalence at the horror he saw. The idea that the horror is pronounced by Kurtz to refer to Western imperialism is fallacious. Rather, it is meant to refer to the horror felt by Kurtz because he sold his soul to the devil and realized only too late that he could not be saved. Certain

it is that Marlow condemns this but there is something he has learnt, which Conrad wanted to evoke without mentioning it explicitly or wished to evoke but was unspeakable, just like the rites he mentioned, namely that the secret teachings of the past societies could be legitimated in face of all the hollowness that has dominated the lives of Europeans who have lost all touch with the other facet of life. The spiritual facet is not necessarily found in monotheistic religions but in the lore spread by occult societies of which Kurtz is a perpetuator. The idea that fascinates Marlow at the end is not that Kurtz had better values than the other European colonists or that he was a learned person, but that he was conscious of death, that he had a consciousness that could probe, reflect and engage with the mysteries of the human mind. Marlow comments:

If such is the form of ultimate wisdom, then life is a greater riddle than some of us think it to be. I was within a hair's breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say. *This is the reason why I affirm that Kurtz was a remarkable man. He had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up—he had judged. 'The horror!' He was a remarkable man. After all, this was the expression of some sort of belief; it had candour, it had conviction, it had a vibrating note of revolt in its whisper, it had the appalling face of a glimpsed truth—the strange commingling of desire and hate.* And it is not my own extremity I remember best— a vision of greyness without form filled with physical pain, and a careless contempt for the evanescence of all things—even of this pain itself. No! It is his extremity that I seem to have lived through. True, he had made that last stride, he had stepped over the edge, while I had been permitted to draw back my hesitating foot. And perhaps in this is the whole difference; perhaps all the wisdom, and all truth, and all sincerity, are just compressed into that inappreciable moment of time in which we step over the threshold of the invisible. Perhaps! I like to think my summing-up would not have been a word of careless contempt. Better his cry—much better. It was an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions. But it was a victory! That is why I have remained loyal to Kurtz to the last, and even beyond, when a long time after I heard once more, not his own voice, but the echo of his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal. (146-147)

Marlow perceives that Kurtz is a fascinating person. He uses the adjective 'remarkable' because he thinks that Kurtz was after all brave enough to voice the unspeakable trap



one is left in whenever one attempts to explore the deepest confines of life and death. Marlow merely 'peeped over the edge' of death but Kurtz had embraced the 'whole universe piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness' Marlow expresses wonder at Kurtz because he dared not hide the truth any longer. His ego could no longer deceive itself, as would Marlow's who would keep lying to the world and maintain the social self especially when he meets the intended. If Marlow praises Kurtz, it is because he has dared condemn the whole experiment of life. What astounded him was not his voice but 'the echo of his magnificent eloquence thrown to me from a soul as translucently pure as a cliff of crystal' Conrad had experienced death before and this experiment or what Marlow calls peeping over the edge/ seems to have made him cowardly but conscious that the secret of all great souls lies in trying to experience the impossible through experimenting the edge of death whether through paganistic rituals, through occult practices, suicide or through writing.

The fact that Marlow underscores the issue of death at the end shows that Conrad had been traumatized by that attempt to kill himself around 1874. Conrad's trauma was displaced in writing and most of his heroes in the rest of his novels feel guilty of some sin, including Kurtz, Marlow. Lord Jim. This feeling of guilt is due to Conrad's reiterative process of self-blame which is reflected in his inability to cope with the trauma of having failed to kill himself, of both seeing death and 'being permitted to withdraw his feet'. The fact that he wrote in a complex, shady and lugubrious style was one of displacing the traumas generated by having once experienced the end of life. Writing about darkness and the unspeakable is a way of showing that he has like his predecessors been traumatized by death, by the meaning of existence and the destiny of man. The concern with death in different guises such as the occult, (his many references to Plato and Buddha in the novel), hides in a sense some signs of this trauma. Although unconsciously Conrad and Marlow hid their games in condemning the aggressive deeds of Kurtz on a humanistic or imperialist level, the question remains unanswered: why has Conrad, through his narrator, only drawn the context for occultism even as he kept asserting that he was addressing a critique against Europe? Why has Lacoue Labarthe himself, as well as some contributors to that book that is paying homage to Labarthe's essay on 'L'Horreur Occidentale' only flirted with some mystery to be elucidated in the heart of darkness but they never addressed the issue? Lacoue says,

*Heart of Darkness* is a kind of 'season in hell' or descent into the realm of the dead based on the model of the Homeric *nekyia*. When Marlow is welcomed by the knitting women at the Company's headquarters, the allusion to the Fates is transparent and deliberate. And the references to hell are innumerable. As excess or transgression, the Western *hybris* the metaphysical will to pass through death. Marlow's journey is an initiatory

journey. All the material details suggest that its stakes concern the revelation of a *technique of death*. And this is, after all, the best definition of the Western will to power that may be given – that is, if we keep to the ambiguity of the phrase (both the ambiguity affecting the term technique’ and that resulting from the double genitive). Against the rites of the ‘savages’, which represent perhaps a *knowledge* of death, (Labarthe 119)

Labarthe associates Kurtz’s deeds and techniques of death with the Western will to power. Nevertheless, he seems to have forgotten that it is not only the West that has perpetrated the horror throughout history. The Moguls did that in their conquests, the TsuTsu in the modern age in Africa, the South American Indians in their sacrificial rites and many others. It would have been more accurate to say that, as Ishmael Reed put, ‘all wars against mankind were first initiated by secret societies’. Labarthe does hint above to the fact that the novel represents a descent into the realm of the dead and that Marlow’s journey is an ‘initiatory’ trip to discover the underworld, but he falters when he provides a univocal reading of this initiation rite and interprets it as an encounter with the Western horror. Though Marlow may have intended to critique the horrible practices of the West in Africa, I contend that Conrad’s aim was primarily to point to the timeless dimension of the Faustian myth which is nothing but a treatment of the attempt of man to transcend his limitations and experiment with realms that would allow him to discover the divine, the impossible and death. At the end of his statement, Labarthe has betrayed his claim by declaring that the savages possess ‘the knowledge of death’. How could the enlightened philosopher deem that they know death if he himself does not associate them with the occult forces of life?

Nevertheless, Labarthe merely flirts with the idea and cannot proclaim that Conrad’s constant allusion to how ‘the horror’ is nothing else but a judgment of how dreadful it is to undertake such an unscrupulous journey. To become a god and exploit the natives’ belief in the pagan rites of the past is the ultimate aim of Kurtz who wants to achieve his materialistic pursuits. Labarthe shyly adds,

‘Schelling says that ‘myths’ are not ‘allegorical’. They say nothing other than what they say; they do not have a different meaning from the meaning they enunciate. They are tautegorical (a category Schelling borrows from Coleridge). Heart of Darkness is no exception to this rule. It is not an allegory – say, a metaphysicopolitical allegory – at all. It is the tautegory of the West – that is, of art (of techne). That this art, in this particular instance, is literature itself – in other words, the mythical usage of the original technethat is language – leaves open a question that the analytical outline I have just offered here cannot pretend to answer.



I will therefore leave it at that. My hope is that these brief and – I am perfectly aware of it – inchoate remarks will have afforded a glimpse of what is at stake in the horror, that is, the savagery in us.(120)

Yet it is precisely because myths are not allegorical that the story of Kurtz should be taken at face value. *Heart of Darkness* tells the story of a heart darkened by the dream of the (in)glorious desire to remain alive, powerful and sublime. It is the story that shows the impossibility of the human dream, as it voices the horror, which language itself cannot express because the traumatised subject is so divided and torn apart that his discourse is ripped apart, releasing only fragments of a shattered memory.

Does Labarthe fail to answer the question of the secret behind the horror? Why does he leave that question open? Is it because secret societies constitute a topic that should not be broached by academia and only shyly by men of letters? This will then show how trauma could be contagious and affect not only the author but also the critic. The discovery of what Marlow calls the truth can never happen because man will continually displace it through language and writing. Labarthe could have at least conceded that the colonial enterprise and the occult – rather than reason or the White man's burden of civilization – were closely tied and were complicitous in the colonies, but he never dared spell out that conclusion.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is replete with allusions to the occult and to pagan lore which Conrad has disseminated throughout the text. It is a novel about the modern Faustian character who has sold himself to the demon in order to procure further riches and gain immortality by acting out the role of a God albeit on a temporary basis. Though the work sheds light on the colonial exploitation of Africa and condemns the Western Horror, it was by no means solely written as an indictment of imperialistic greed. The novel was written to explore the follies of man when he engages into the transcendence of the boundaries of his soul. In the words of Marlow who, upon hearing of Kurtz's death, sums up the end of the story, "I went no more near the remarkable man who had pronounced a judgment upon the adventures of his soul on this earth. The voice was gone. What else had been there?" (146). The whole novel was written as an epitaph upon the modern man's loss of soul while undertaking the experience of transcending death and the impossible.

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# **Cultural Representation of the Great Famine Trauma: The Case of the Irish Journalist John Mitchel**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I chose to deal with the Irish Journalist John Mitchel as an outstanding example of cultural representation of the Black Potato Hunger for the following reasons. Indeed, given he was born in 1815 and died in 1875 he lived the pre-Famine, Famine and post-Famine periods not as a layman but as an intellectual. He also witnessed the dynamics of mid-nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, and Ireland's 1848 rebellion. Furthermore, his contribution in the life of the Irish was not only political but also cultural and to some extent literary. This paper intends to study his involvement in those three fields. In fact, Mitchel was an activist militant within the revolutionary political movement called Young Ireland, in his home country, where he took part in founding and spreading the culture of resistance to the Union between England and Ireland in 1801. He pursued this role in the US where he fled after he had been imprisoned by the British government. To this, it should be added his journalistic activities either in Dublin or in the U.S., with always the above objective in mind. Few as they were, his writings continually ascribed the death of around 1 million Irish people to the government of London.

## **Introduction**

The trauma of the Great Famine 1847-1852 had its own cultural and literary representation. According to Christopher Morash, an Irish literary critic, between 1847 and 1900, apart from the numerous pamphlets, travel narratives, histories, journals,

diaries, and other forms of writing, there were at least 14 novels and over 100 poems<sup>5</sup> written which dealt with the Famine. Undeniably, the commemoration of the Irish calamity in 1947 and 1997 brought more works. In this paper, however, I choose to deal with the Irish Journalist John Mitchel as an outstanding example of cultural representation of the Black Potato Hunger. This choice is motivated by the fact he lived the pre-Famine, Famine and post-Famine periods not as a layman but as an intellectual, bearing in mind he was born in 1815 and died in 1875. He also witnessed the dynamics of mid-nineteenth-century Irish nationalism, and Ireland's 1848 rebellion. But above all, his contribution in the life of the Irish was not only political but also cultural and to some extent literary. This paper intends to study his involvement in those three fields in both Ireland, as an Irish nationalist, and in the US, as an Irish-American nationalist.

## 1. Mitchel's Political Activism and Journalistic Experience

### A. Mitchel in Ireland

John Mitchel was born in 1815 in Derry, Londonderry. He was influenced in his education by Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century nationalist Scottish essayist, historian and satirical writer, as well as by the Irish romantic nationalist Thomas Davis.<sup>6</sup> Mitchel began his professional life as a solicitor and soon entered political life with a unique brand of nationalism that emphasized the cultural distinctiveness of Gaelic Ireland and the need to expel the Anglo-Saxon invaders. His ambition was to create a culturally homogenous Irish republic ruled by a native intelligentsia. Subsequently, he joined the National Repeal Association founded in 1840, in Dublin, by Daniel O'Connell who achieved the Catholic Relief Act in 1829 whose aim was to repeal the Act of Union between England and Ireland signed in 1801. Nonetheless, Mitchel parted from O'Connell's opportunistic and clerically influenced political approaches to join, with William Smith O'Brien (protestant), Thomas Meagher (catholic) and others, the emerging Young Ireland movement made up of an interdenominational group of young professionals, journalists, editors, romantic poets along with followers of the Irish newspaper *Nation*. The movement opted for activist militancy and for an inclusive nationalism in which Catholic, Protestant, and even secular Gael and Anglo-Irish unite behind an ultimate goal: Repealing the Union with England. The Great Famine was an important occasion for Young Ireland to attempt to bring peasants' loyalty to the nationalist cause. In this respect, John Mitchel, firebrand nationalist and powerful writer, argued that it was better for people to take the risk of violent revolution than to acquiesce to death by starvation. In retrospect, the Young Ireland was not very successful in convincing the down-trodden masses of the Irish to welcome the nationalist calls. In fact, during the early Famine years, immediate personal concerns of mere survival eclipsed the then meaningless abstract national issues. What is more, the Famine itself blurred the divisions between social and political movements. Protestant missionaries gave soup to

<sup>5</sup>See Christopher Morash "Making memories: the literature of the Irish Famine" , , in Patrick O'Sullivan, ed., *The Meaning of The Famine*, the Irish World Wide: History, Heritage, Identity, Volume 6, London, Leicester University Press, 1997, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> He wrote a book on this poet called, *The Poems of Thomas Davis* (Introduction), D. & J. Sadlier & Co., New York, 1866.

starving recipients, Catholics and Protestants alike. Protestant landlords blamed Catholic strong farmers for dismissing their labourers and servants. Faced with this amalgamation of reactions and attitudes, the nationalists could not draw clear-cut lines between the people's "champions" and "enemies". Certainly, the Famine and its subsequent emigration gave rise to some anger and resistance early on. However, such emotions did not develop into the sharp, modern Catholic nationalism. The Famine-stricken Irish knew that the Famine and its horrors ought not have happened, but they did not know whom to find fault with<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, through Young Ireland's political activism, soon England became the target of harsh criticism from the Irish both at home and abroad. Indeed, they conceived the Famine itself as a logical result of British tyranny and the enshrined massive emigration of the Irish as exile forced by English oppression. In this connection, A.M. Sullivan, a nationalist politician, maintained that "the burning memory of horrors" outweighed the English generosity during the Famine. Sullivan contended the Famine's horrors might have been greatly avoided, if the ruling authorities had been more prompt and competent.<sup>8</sup>

Unsurprisingly, contemporary nationalists had always usually blamed England for all Irish misfortunes. Of course, such animosity was not without apparent reason. It was under British Laws and often enforced by British troops that sweeping clearance of grieving paupers was carried out as they were. These practices antagonised many Irish people who had equated the government with cruel Irish landlord class. Young Irelanders such as John Mitchel were outrightly violent in ascribing deaths and emigrations to British ill will. Mitchel and his peers clearly expressed their rage at Irishmen who regarded the Famine as "visitation of providence" instead of a visitation of English landlordism. To explain that the Famine could have been avoided, Mitchel had this to say "the Almighty sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."<sup>9</sup> Though Young Ireland constituted a minority in its revolutionary response to the crisis, by the early 1850s Catholic and clerical opinion was almost utterly unanimous in blaming the British government for Irish grievances and described emigration as a plot to send to exile the totality of Irish people.

Neither the advent of the Famine nor the enshrined emigration could fully explain the whole story of antagonism between England, on the one hand, and Irish nationalists and most churchmen, on the other. Indeed, for decades, these people had believed that Westminster was invariably against Irish interests, and that most Protestants were at best devious. In addition, for such politically aware Irishmen the government's parsimonious relief measures, all confirmed pre-existing mistrusts and seemed to form a calculated pattern of systematic "extermination" and re-colonisation. Above all, that the London *Times* and other leading British newspaper welcomed the Famine and the ensuing massive emigration as an eventual solution to "Irish misery and discontent" was

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<sup>7</sup> Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 304.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Martin Sullivan, *The Story of Ireland*, P. J. Kennedy, 1892, p. 504.

<sup>9</sup> John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, author's edition, Glasgow, 1876, p. 219.

an outward “proof” of the government’s evil design.<sup>10</sup> As a result, wholehearted nationalists such as Mitchel became filled with wrath against England. On 8 November 1845, he wrote an article entitled “The Detectives”, in which he said,

“The people are beginning to fear that the Irish Government is merely a machinery for their destruction; that, for all the usual functions of Government, this Castle-nuisance is altogether powerless; that it is unable, or unwilling, to take a single step for the prevention of famine, for the encouragement of manufactures, or providing fields of industry, and is only active in promoting, by high premiums and bounties, the horrible manufacture of crimes.”<sup>11</sup>

Whereas Young Ireland’s weekly, the *Nation*, was the country’s most popular newspaper, by mid 1846 O’Connell was calling Young Ireland idealistic allies and decided to rid himself away from them. Accordingly, by asking on all members of the Repeal Association to ban violence to gain independence, O’Connell obliged the Young Irishmen to leave the association. In fact, despite their bombastic orations glorifying warrior patriots, at that time Young Irishmen were not envisaging any armed rebellion. Yet, not approving of O’Connell’s total rejection of force, in early 1847 they founded their own organisation: the Irish Confederation. However, their influence was reduced considerably as they became outside the Catholic nationalist mainstream, and also subject to charges of being betrayers of the dying O’Connell (1843). Furthermore, the Young Irishmen soon divided among themselves. William Smith O’Brien, Protestant landlord and nominal leader of the Confederation, and Charles Gavan Duffy, Catholic editor of the *Nation*, were conservative nationalists although they were secular. They did not desire rebellion or social revolution, both dreamed instead of a patriotic landlord-peasant-Protestant Catholic alliance which would press Britain to grant repeal of the Union. By contrast, the hard-liner Mitchel advocated violent hatred to landlords and England alike, and young orators such as Thomas Francis Meagher required recourse to violence. In early 1848 the division between Young Irishmen was so acute that Mitchel resigned and started his own newspaper, the *United Irishman*, in November 1848, and blatantly preached armed revolt. In fact, through his paper he called for resistance against [British](#) rule in Ireland, through the non-payment of rents, and preventing the export of food from the country and became the most vocal in highlighting how the British, in his opinion, deliberately exasperated and mismanaged the [Irish Potato Famine](#) to reduce the population of Ireland.<sup>12</sup>

However, by early summer of 1848 the outbreak of revolutions all over Europe reunited conservative and radical Young Ireland. Accordingly, euphoric news from different European capitals made the nationalists aspire even a successful Irish rebellion and the *Nation*’s columns became nearly as fiery as those in the *United Irishman*. The British government reacted by arresting Mitchel, suppressing his newspaper, and sentencing him to fourteen years’ imprisonment in Tasmania (Australia). Later, the

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<sup>10</sup> McGovern, Brian P., *John Mitchel: Irish Nationalist, Southern Secessionist*, University Of Tennessee Press, 2009, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> *The Nation* newspaper, 1845.

<sup>12</sup> William Dillon, *The Life of John Mitchel*, (London, 1888) 2 Vols. p.177.



government struck again, arrested Duffy, seized the *Nation's* offices, and outlawed the confederation. The Young Irelanders vainly tried to stand to the repression by attempting to instigate popular insurrection for which they had not prepared their rank-and-file.<sup>13</sup>

### B. Mitchel in the U.S.

Even if the 1848 revolt failed in Ireland, it triggered sympathy amongst Irish-Americans. Activism against English government, which had been led mainly by Young Irelanders, who viewed emigration as exile, was renewed in the US. When John Mitchel and other intellectuals and journalists escaped to the US in the early 1850s, they received heroes' welcomes. In this connection, the notion of Irish-American nationalism was set up before the arrival of Irish immigrants either during or immediately after the Famine. Indeed, organised emigrants' opposition to British colonisation had existed since the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the creation of modern Irish-American nationalism took place at the hands of the Famine generation. The advent of mass emigration during the 1840s and 1850s had shaped the Irish-American community,<sup>14</sup> paving the way to Irish-American political activism. In the words of David A. Wilson, "the history of Irish-American nationalism usually begins with the Great Famine."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in 1853 John Mitchel settled in the United States and established *The Citizen* newspaper in New York, as an expression of radical anti-British opinion.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, from New York Mitchel moved to the South and founded a new paper, the *Southern Citizen* in 1857, marking a dramatic change in his position towards liberation whereby his previous fervent calls for freedom in Ireland vanished into the air. He backed slavery and during the Civil War he had 2 sons who died and a son who lost an arm within the Confederate army. He argued that slaves in the southern United States were better cared for and fed than Irish cottiers, or industrial workers in English cities like Manchester. His views were explicitly racist as he contended that negroes were "an innately inferior people"<sup>17</sup>. He claimed that slavery was inherently moral, it was "good in itself" and that he "promotes it for its own sake."<sup>18</sup>

He moved the paper to Washington in 1859. When the Civil War broke out in 1861 he moved to Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate capital, to edit the *Richmond Enquire*. Mitchel, then, moved to New York City in 1865 to edit the *Daily News*. Slavery was dead and Mitchel returned his focus to the issue of Ireland. He founded his third American newspaper, the *Irish Citizen* in New York City, but the paper failed to attract readers and folded in 1872. In part this was because he used it to criticize the Irish-born Catholic archbishop of New York, John Hughes.

Thus, although Mitchel achieved fame as a defender of Irish Americans, he went down in infamy as a proponent of slavery. Indeed, given his previous record as an

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Martin Sullivan, *The Story of Ireland*, P. J. Kennedy, 1892, p. 559.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas N. Brown, *Irish-American Nationalism: 1870-1890*, Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1966, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> David A. Wilson, *United Irishmen, United States: Immigrant Radicals in The Early Republic*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998, p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> *History Ireland*, May 2007, p.30.

<sup>17</sup> [Southern Citizen: John Mitchel, the Confederacy and slavery](#), *History Ireland*, May 2007. [Archived](#) May 6, 2012 at the [Wayback Machine](#)

<sup>18</sup> *Fogarty, Lillian (1921). Fr. John Kenyon – A Patriot Priest of '48, Dublin, Whelan & Son. p. 163*

outright supporter of freedom, and his sturdy stand against British governments particularly during the Famine and even prior to it, charging them with colonization and tyranny, it would be hardly to believe he had supported the most degrading institution worldwide- slavery. Nevertheless, perhaps displaying loyalty to the region where he was living made him opt for pragmatic solutions rather than for fixed principles. Besides, may be because he was in a foreign country and looked at himself and all Irish immigrants, as exiles, who would return to free Ireland sooner or later.<sup>19</sup>

## II. Mitchel's Writings

Mitchel published nine books between 1845 and 1875. They are:

*The Life and Times of Hugh O'Neill*, James Duffy, 1845

*Jail Journal, or, Five Years in British Prisons*, Office of the "Citizen", New York, 1854

*Poems of James Clarence Mangan* (Introduction), P. M. Haverty, New York, 1859

*An Apology for the British Government in Ireland*, Irish National Publishing Association, 1860

*The History of Ireland, from the Treaty of Limerick to the Present Time*, Cameron & Ferguson, Glasgow, 1864

*The Poems of Thomas Davis* (Introduction), D. & J. Sadlier & Co., New York, 1866

*The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, Lynch, Cole & Meehan 1873

*The Crusade of the Period*, Lynch, Cole & Meehan 1873

*Reply to the Falsification of History by James Anthony Froude, Entitled 'The English in Ireland'*, Cameron & Ferguson n.d.

I have focused on two books, namely *Jail Journal* and *The Last Conquest (Perhaps)*. It was during his journey to Tasmania (Australia) that he wrote *Jail Journal* in which he repudiated [British](#) policy in Ireland and advocated a more radical brand of nationalism. In the same work, Mitchel also remembered his friends O'Brian and Meagher of Young Ireland and criticized O'Connell's insistence on peaceful means in resisting the tyranny of England. Equally, he recalled his children and wife, "what will they do? What is to become of them? By this time, undoubtedly, my office, my newspaper, types, books, all that I had, are seized on by the Government burglar."<sup>20</sup> The whole book is written on this pattern: Remembering things past along with an acute description of the journey, without forgetting to blame England for its oppressive management of Irish affairs. The book does not contain statistics, figures or detailed accounts as generally found in social sciences books such as history, sociology and economics, which suggests that Mitchel's *Jail Journey* is rather a literary piece of writing rather than a history work.

In 1861, however, Mitchel wrote *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* in which he unquestioningly inscribed the Famine in Ireland's long history of oppression by the British colonizers whose economic policies led to starvation while Ireland used to export agricultural produce to England. He mocked the famine relief, contending that the British government intended to exterminate the Irish people. In his view, there could be no doubt that the responsibility for turning the potato failure into a major disaster must

<sup>19</sup> David T. Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877*, Chapel Hill (NC), The University of North Carolina Press, 2001, p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> John Mitchel, *Jay Journal*, M.H Gill & Son edition, 1854.



be attributed exclusively to London. He eventually argued the union with England was a total fiasco,

That an island which is said to be an integral part of the richest empire on the globe—and the most fertile portion of that empire [...] should in five years lose two and a half millions of its people (more than one fourth) by hunger, and fever the consequence of hunger is a matter that seems to ask elucidation.<sup>21</sup>

Mitchel's thesis stating that England caused the Great Famine brought about a controversy among historians. In fact, Nationalist historians such as John O'Rourke (1872)<sup>22</sup>, Charles Gavan Duffy<sup>23</sup> and later on the Cecil-Woodham Smith<sup>24</sup> (1962), roughly adhered to this stand and emphasized the English government role in the unprecedented number of the Irish who perished out of starvation. Revisionists such as Robert Dudley Edwards<sup>25</sup> and Theodore Moody<sup>26</sup>, however, rejected out of hand the assumption and ascribed the Great Hunger to an ecological accident, denying the role of England in the calamity as well as putting the number of casualties at "many, very many died" and not at around one million. Post-revisionists, such as Cormac O'Grada<sup>27</sup> and Joel Mokyr<sup>28</sup>, in their turn, put forward another view. They reckoned the ecological accident but at the same time held the English government responsible for the trauma on the ground it was not prompt and efficient in its efforts to reduce the number of the victims. They also argued that London would have certainly been more effective if the calamity had struck a region in England. Recently a new trend has appeared called Neo-Nationalism (Christine Kinealy<sup>29</sup> as an example) which went back to Mitchel's thesis, lashing out against the Revisionists.

Apart from history, fiction also drew from Mitchel's writings. According to Christopher Morash,<sup>30</sup> the Irish literary critic, two novels were inspired from his books. One is *The O'Donnells of Glen Cottage: A Tale of the Famine Years in Ireland*, by the Irish-American writer D. P. Conyngham and published in 1903. Another, in 1937, is entitled *Famine* by Liam O'Flaherty. Morash pursued that James Joyce, also, expressed his view of Mitchel. Indeed, he mocked his racist claims against slaves appearing in Mitchel's work *The Last Conquest* by producing some of his statements in his novel *Ulysses*.<sup>31</sup> Within this connection, Joyce's antagonism to Irish nationalism and Catholic bigotry was already

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<sup>21</sup> John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, op., cit., p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> John O'Rourke, *History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847*.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Gavan Duffy, *Four Years of Irish History*, London, Cassel, Getter, Galpin, 1883.

<sup>24</sup> Cecil-Woodham Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1848*. London, England, Penguin Books, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-1952*, New York, New York University Press, 1957

<sup>26</sup> Theodore Moody, et al., *A New History of Ireland, Vol. VIII*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1982.

<sup>27</sup> Cormac O'Grada, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, And Memory*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved, A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*, Boston, Allen & Unwin, 1983.

<sup>29</sup> See Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Morash, "Making memories: the literature of the Irish Famine", in Patrick O'Sullivan, ed., *The Meaning of The Famine*, op., cit., p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> See *Ulysses*, 1922, ed. Hans Walter Gabler, Wolfhard Steppe, and Claus Melchior, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 270.

clear in the collection of short stories *Dubliners* where he depicted all the protagonists as paralysed either physically, mentally, or culturally because of their exaggerated attachment to Irish nationalism or to Catholic teachings. In fact, Dublin stands as the microcosm of the whole Ireland. Thus Mitchel's writings stood as a landmark for those who wrote about the Great Famine after him, either in historical studies or in fiction. His books served as a magnet for the nationalists, like himself, and as a repelling force for those who did not see eye to eye with him.

### Conclusion

Culture, in its anthropological meaning, as a way of life or, in its meaning as an artistic production, appeals to the case of John Mitchel. On the one hand, he represented the Irish or most of them in their way of life. Indeed, he started his life in Ireland, emigrated in the US, became Irish-American and finally returned to the mother land, even if the mass of the Famine immigrants never went back in Ireland. Within this context, Bryan P. McGovern argues that Mitchel's experiences, particularly in the US, "were not all that different from most Irish Americans."<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, his writings (books and newspapers) dealing with the Famine and the role of England, and particularly, those books which are closer to literature rather than to history, attest to the artistic nature of his works. Thus, in both definitions of culture, John Mitchel was actually a cultural representation of the trauma of the Great Hunger that befell Ireland.

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## History, Trauma, and Healing in a Post-trauma Stage: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as Case Study.

By Houda Ayari Msolli

### Abstract

The present paper reads the legacy of slavery as a national trauma and examines its long-term socio-psychological effects on African American subjects, taking Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as casebook. In *Beloved* (1987), a belated slave narrative, Toni Morrison expertly re-incarnates the evils of the past through a fragmented narration, and more pertinently, through the gothic presence of the title character. Beloved, murdered by her own mother, as an ultimate sign of a mother's protective love, comes back after twenty years, as a ghost. The title character symbolically embodies the haunting past: the devastating effects of slavery and its potential transgenerational degenerating impact on black subjectivity. The gothic insistent presence of Beloved plays a dual role in the novel. It is both a reflection of the heavy weight of a haunting past and a vigilant reminder of the necessity of its confrontation before considering the stage of recovery. The communal efforts of the characters that people Morrison's work, face to the supernatural -embodied by Beloved, crystallize the urging necessity of a collective effort to survive the long-term effects of slavery. It is along these lines that this dissertation will approach Morrison's *Beloved* from a postcolonial and post-modern perspectives to thoroughly examine the author's attempt at collective healing from the emotional and psychological scars of slavery.

**Key words:** African American Historical Novel, Slavery, Gothic, Fragmentation, Healing, slavery socio-psychological pathologies, trans-generational trauma, Post-trauma Stage.

### Introduction

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The production of any artistic work necessarily involves three factors: the “genetic factor,” the “objective factor,” and the “affective factor” (Rarastesia 28). The genetic factor touches the life of the author and reflects the impact of the social context in which the artefact was produced. The objective factor pertains to the work of art as an aesthetic product in itself. The affective factor relates to the impact of the literary work on the reader (28). Morrison’s *Beloved* must be, therefore, conceived as the outcome of the intersection between the historical, the personal, the aesthetic and the reader’s response. In *Beloved*, Morrison identifies the historical trauma of slavery as the source of African American psychological and emotional disorders over engendered by slavery. Consequently this paper elaborates the psychological and emotional effects of the trauma of slavery on black subjectivity, as belatedly pictured by Morrison on her narrative, and pinpoints Morrison’s resolution that confrontation and collective re-memory stimulate collective healing.

### **I. Historical Overview**

Chattel Slavery, we often hear defined as “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised” (Allain 439). In our collective memory, slavery is simply associated with the enslavement of blacks in the pre-Civil War era and its legal practice in America. Re-reading slavery implies *de facto* more than a simple record of historical facts; it implies restoring the experience to the literal, with an attention to the psychic trauma endured by every enslaved soul.

What we term ‘slavery’ refers to the painful experience of blacks’ forceful kidnapping from their homes and families, bound in chains, marching for days through strange lands, chained to one another, like a group of animals (Buell 4). As they reached the sea, they were forced into the lower deck of a ship, where they lived in the cold darkness for two months, cramped together with a mass of strangers who did not even speak the same language (ibid). When they finally reached a new land and saw the daylight again, they were marched to an auction block and sold to the highest buyer (ibid). In the new life provided by the owner, slaves had to work for long hours, were given as much food as needed to survive the day after. In addition to their physical exploitation and isolation from their families, blacks were, more importantly, deprived from their freedom.

Inspired by the real life of Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave who killed her own children as a measure of protection, Morrison writes *Beloved*, a narrative that centers on the haunting of the occupants of “124,” a house on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio, recording historical facts that occurred in the years following the American Civil War.

According to Homi Bhabha the history to which *Beloved* belongs is one of a “projective past,” a past that is projective because it has not yet been projected (Vine 158). This projective past speaks of what has been historically repressed and moves back to the future. The projective past comes “belatedly,” like the one projected by Morrison in *Beloved*. The reconstitution of the past through a belated slave narrative communicates the author’s belief in the necessity of confronting the trauma engendered by slavery in order to transcend its evils.

### **II- Re-incarnation of the Trauma through the Gothic in *Beloved***

Morrison's attitude in *Beloved* displays an authorial ambivalence (typically that of a 'colonized' author), oscillating between the willingness to 'let go of the past' and the 'inescapability of re-memory.' The opening lines of her text are typically illustrative of her ambivalent attitude and guide the reader to an interpretation of her text from this outlook.

Despite the most obvious allusion of the opening passage of *Beloved* to the evils of the past that occupy Sethe's household, the same lines diffuse a positive energy that contains their surface negative inference (Marks 26). Key to the understanding of this duality is the number 124 that carries a double significance. This number is the numerological equivalent of seven, the number of Orisa Ogun, possessor of Iron, weaponry and technology (Washington 54). Ogun's role is to protect and empower enslaved Africans. This number, also, unconsciously invokes in the mind of readers the missing number three in the mind of the reader. In Christianity, number three is also indicative of the spiritual unity. The same figure is, nonetheless, associated with the silent but cunning signifying Yoruba figure, Esu (Washington 54).

In *Beloved*, the brutality of the institution of slavery is defined by the similarly gruesome act of infanticide, a self-protective, yet, auto-destructive measure of the colonized in counter response to the colonizer's violation of his rights. Sethe's commitment of infanticide must be, therefore, conceived as both destructive and auto-destructive. Because Sethe knows what it means to be isolated from one's family, deprived from one's freedom, and a slave for a white master, she resolves that death will be a better place for her two-year old daughter than Sweet Home. In Sweet Home, Sethe had undergone the trauma of being punished by a schoolteacher, who had beaten her so cruelly that her back was covered by scars. In Sethe's eyes, physical scars are senseless compared to the psychological scar engendered by the sight of her mother hanged along with other women. Sethe's childhood was also marked by the humiliating experience of having the schoolteacher's nephews suck her breasts and steal the milk of her children. It is in light of these events, that critics came to read Sethe's infanticide as an ultimate sign of a mother's protective love.

Sethe's infanticide was intended to protect her two-year daughter from "unspeakable" experiences. The strong maternal love Sethe bears for her children makes it impossible for her to let them undergo the dehumanizing experience of slavery; because "in slavery the value of humanity is nonexistent" (Samuel and Hudson-Weems 104). When the schoolteacher arrives, accompanied by the slave catcher, Sethe resolves that she would put her babies where "they'd be safe" (Morrison 164). In such circumstances, Sethe believed that cutting her baby's throat is a marginal detail compared to the evils of slavery her infant will be subject to. Her determination was fuelled by her conviction that anything, even death, would offer a better life than the one provided by what Morrison sarcastically called, "Sweet Home." Infanticide, from Sethe's standpoint, was not perceived as a crime but rather a necessity.

Sethe's infanticide is also a measure of protection of her two-year daughter from the disgrace of rape. According to Sethe: "far worse was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp Paid saw and what made Paul D tremble of" (Morrison 251). Sethe acts like a mother who would never allow her child to experience the trauma of being raped, of having whites "[d]irty [her] so bad [she] couldn't like [herself]



anymore” (Morrison 75). She strongly believed that “being brutally overworked, maimed, or killed is subordinate to rape” (Barnett 195). Frantz Fanon underscored in this book, *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), the importance of sexuality to understand blacks’ psychopathologies from a psychoanalytic perspective. Rape, therefore, is a one major –often- silenced- traumatic experience that must be seriously considered to heal the psychological disorders of the post-colonial body.

Sethe’s opting for infanticide stems also from a belief in the Gold-like authority of parents upon their infants. It is a belief that dates back to the eighteenth-century, stating that children were properties of their parents. Parents might kill their children as a measure of protection from poverty, for instance, if they see it suitable. Sethe’s post-infanticide trauma has often been disregarded by critics and scholars who tackled this subject. The ghost of *Beloved* can also be read as an incarnation of the mother’s post-traumatic disorders; their recurrent appearance is a symbolic parallel for the observed recurrent aspect of the psychological disorders engendered by one or many traumatic incident(s). The resistance of the character of *Beloved* to any sharp attempt at identification provides ground truth for a Freudian reading of *Beloved*. Fanon quotes from Freud to pinpoint the major aspects of trauma. In this respect, Freud observes that even though,

“[t]his trauma has been quite expelled from the memory and the consciousness of the patient [. . .], the repressed desire continues to exist in the unconscious; it is on watch constantly for an opportunity to make itself known and it soon comes back into consciousness, but in disguise that makes it impossible to recognize; in other words, the repressed thought is replaced in consciousness by another that acts as its surrogate, its *Ersatz*, and that soon surrounds itself with all those feelings of morbidity that had been supposedly averted by the repression (qtd. in Fanon 111).

The motif of haunting, psychoanalytically speaking, suggests that the ghost necessarily originates in the protagonist’s imagination. As a matter of fact, the ghost, in Morrison’s narrative is symptomatic of the psychological disorders of the inhabitants of the 124. These issues, as indicated by Freud are engendered by a common repressed traumatic experience undergone by all the characters of the novel. Sethe, for instance, is victim of the traumatic experiences she was trying to save her daughter.

In his article, “The Negro and Psychopathology,” Frantz Fanon elaborates on the psychological disorders of colonial subjects. He contends that blacks’ psychological difficulties are triggered by the history of slavery deconstructing thereby the pseudoscientific correlation between ‘blood’ and ‘behavior.’ To justify his ideology, Fanon quotes from Freud the text that reads:

In almost every case, we could see that the symptoms were, so to speak, like residues, of emotional experiences, to which for this reason we later gave the name of psychic traumas. Their individual characters were linked to the traumatic scenes that provoked them. According to the classic terminology, the symptoms were determined by “scenes” of which they were the mnemonic residues and it was no longer necessary to regard them as arbitrary and enigmatic effects of the neurosis. In contrast, however, to what was expected,

it was not always a single event that was the cause of the symptom; most often, on the contrary, it arose from multiple traumas. (111)

As indicated by the statement above, blacks' psychological issues are the outcome of a repressed history, of unhappy childhoods, of unspoken experiences of rape that inevitably produce unhealthy mothers who, in turn, transmit their psychic disorders from one generation to another.

## **2. 1. Textual Re-incarnation of Trauma**

### **2.1.1 Re-incarnation of Trauma through the Gothic**

In *Beloved*, the evils of the past are pertinently embodied by the symbolic gothic presence of the title character. Beloved, murdered by her own mother, as an ultimate sign of a mother's protective love, comes back after twenty years, as a ghost. The title character is a symbol for the haunting presence of the past. Its lingering presence embodies the devastating effects of slavery and isolation, and their potential danger for blacks in a post-trauma stage. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon interprets the metaphor of the haunting as an embodiment of an absent presence. Gordon explicates "that which appears not to be there is often a seething presence, [. . .] the ghost is just the sign or the empirical evidence that [. . .] tells you a haunting is taking place" (8). The dichotomy of Appearance/Disappearance is another hint at ghosts' existence, because a "disappearance" is only "real" when it is "apparitional" (Gordon 8). The ghost's "apparition and disappearance are the principal forms by which something invisible, or seemingly not there, makes itself known or apparent to us" (Gordon 63). Through the metaphor of the haunting ghost, slavery is brought to the literal, its determining power as a "nightmare on the minds of the living" is allocated its "fullest expression" (Erickson 136). Perceived from this angle, the ghost, functions as a symbol of the resurfacing of the "absent presence" of the repressed traumatic experiences of the past.

The text gradually delivers the symbolic meaning of its gothic presence. The departure of Paul D, the withdrawal of all the female characters from Sethe's household, at the end of the second section of the narrative, open onto a "glossolalia<sup>33</sup> of ancestral voices," and the baby ghost starts to invoke the collective dimension of the trauma, multiply evocative of the middle passage and its victims" (Rippl 29). Although *Beloved* represents for Sethe "a screen for the memory of her dead child," her story recalls 'more' of the collective history that goes back beyond the horizon of Sethe's remembering in 1873. As a "collective screen," Beloved becomes no less anonymous, and "the past speaks through her as medium" (Rippl 29). Beloved is therefore, as Deborah Horwitz puts it, "the haunting symbol of the many beloveds –generations of mothers and daughters- hunted down and stolen from Africa" (157). She embodies the collective pain and "shame-rage" of the victims of slavery and the "psychic woundedness of those who survived the middle passage" (Bouson 152). Beloved is the veritable "embodiment of pain" as Gurleen Gerwal rightly described her.

## **2.2. Re-incarnation of Trauma through Fragmentation**

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<sup>33</sup>'Glossolalia' defines profuse and often emotionally charged speech that mimics coherent speech but is usually unintelligible to the listener and that is uttered in some states of religious ecstasy and some schizophrenic states.



In *Beloved*, the evils of the past are also communicated by a fragmented narration, a persistent shift from third person narration to omniscient narration to interior monologue, interwoven with elliptical passages, clearly reflective of a pathological state of amnesia<sup>34</sup> (Pérez-Torres 180). Kathleen Marks suggests that the non-linearity of the time-line in *Beloved* exposes the reader, and even the author, to feelings of displacement and alienation undergone by slaves at the heyday of slavery (Marks 26). All are urged to re-visit an “underworld of memory,” as Morrison herself acknowledges in her article, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African American Presence in American Literature:”

The reader is snatched, yanked, thrown, into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel’s population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. No lobby, no door, no entrance –a gangplank, perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching -this kidnapping- propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet, as the sounds in the body of the ship itself may have changed. (32)

In the “no-time” of this narrative, the characters, as if on a slave ship, are “[s]uspended between “the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead,” to borrow Baby Suggs terms in the novel (Erikson 76). Slavery in this sense, is textually re-constituted; and, therefore, confronted and worked through.

### **III- Healing the Traumatized Body**

The gothic insistent presence of *Beloved* plays a dual role in the novel. It is both a reflection of the heavy weight of a haunting past and a vigilant reminder of the necessity of its confrontation before considering the stage of recovery. The process of healing, Morrison suggests, goes through three major phases: confrontation, re-memory, with a necessary shift from individual re-memory to the collective re-memory, to finally exorcise the evils of slavery. The same process applied by trauma theorists.

Confrontation is a first and major step in the process of healing. The confrontation between Sethe and Paul D is a pivotal moment in the narrative, for it stands for Sethe’s confrontation with her own wrongdoing. He accuses her of having “too thick” of love and, in defence, she responds that “[l]ove is or it ain’t. thin love ain’t love at all” (Morrison 164). Morrison implies that even after the confrontation Sethe is convinced that her cruel act saved her daughter no less cruel experiences she was predestined to live if she had to live as a slave. Yet, the importance of this crucial moment of confrontation lies in its transitory value, being the episode in which Sethe confesses, justifies her act, and finally realizes that her trauma is shared by other members of her community.

Re-memory is the following step in the process of healing. Healing or “clearing” as Baby Suggs, the self-appointed preacher of the novel calls it, takes place when the individual “self” is transcended to the collective “us,” when fragmentation loses ground to fusion. Sethe, for instance, realizes that her memory is part of a larger collective

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<sup>34</sup> The state of amnesia refers to a gap in one’s memory or its complete loss due usually to brain injury, shock, fatigue, repression or illness.

memory when she learns from Nan, her grandmother, that her mother killed all the children fathered by the whites who raped her except for her (Rushdy 47). Another character who also helped Sethe exorcise this painful memory is Ella, who similarly committed infanticide. The collective aspect of the trauma and the re-memory, suggested by this section of the novel, indicates that, for African Americans and their future descendants, the present is inevitably connected to the past (Rushdy 47).

Critic Ashraf Rushdy believes that healing was attained, in Morrison's narrative, when Denver's "power of love" opposed the ghost of her sister's "unforgiving" (53). Beloved "accuses" whereas Denver "embraces," Beloved "will be disremembered and unaccounted for" while Denver is "the source of remembering" (53). When Denver follows Baby Suggs' advice of leaving Sethe's haunted household, she had to unveil the secret of Beloved. Denver's confession was an important step in the process of healing, because it signalled the move from individual trauma to collective trauma. Significantly, it is Ella, one of the community members and not a preacher, as is often the tradition of Catholic exorcism, who initiates the process of exorcism of Beloved. In addition to its symbolic allusion to the idea of purgation, the ritual of exorcism results in the community's solidarity against the potential dangers of the supernatural. The communal efforts of the characters that people Morrison's work face the supernatural -embodied by Beloved- crystallize Morrison's belief in the urging necessity of a collective effort to survive the long-term effects of slavery.

Morrison's narrative manages also to liberate its author from the burden and heavy weight of the past; for re-memory requires re-imagining and, therefore, leads to an indispensable confrontation with a traumatizing past. Writing, along these lines, can be perceived as a liberating act of its painful content; a vehicle through which the author, herself, makes a step forward in the process of healing. She recovers the female characters' traumas, let them face the experience and accept it. The final stage is integrating the trauma in the personal memory of the mother and the collective memory of the slaves.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we can say that Morrison shows the reader that the psychological disorders of black people are not biologically-defined but rather the outcome of repressed traumatic experiences such as, slavery, isolation, exploitation, physical and verbal aggressions, and rape that they experienced. The haunting presence of Beloved articulates Morrison's belief that, up to the 1980s, the wounds of slavery have not yet healed. *Beloved* can be, thus, read as the swan song of an era, in which the author uses her pen to bury a haunting past and readily welcome a healthier future.

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## Is the Theory of Trauma a Theory of Language?

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### Abstract

The concern of many critics has recently been centered on past events or memories and how they are represented through language. Trauma theory and other poststructuralist and deconstructive theories have mainly focused on revealing the limits of language in conveying the reality or truth of past traumatic events. Trauma, as defined by Cathy Caruth, is an event that is so shocking and unexpected that cannot be fully assimilated or integrated in the consciousness as it occurs; but it returns belatedly through nightmares, repetitions and flashbacks. It is so unexpected that it creates a breach at the level of the cognitive, linguistic and time structure of the mind. Thus, the traumatized subject can no longer speak or communicate trauma simply. If trauma is an event that defies cognition, perception and understanding, how is it represented in language? Indeed, it is a representation that challenges the conventional straightforward and epistemologically certain modes of narration. In an interview I conducted on August 30, 2015, Cathy Caruth argued that “no event can be predetermined as traumatic; Trauma is the structure of a delayed experience. Trauma is not determined by the event but by effects”. In other words, a text is considered as symptomatic of trauma not in the way it brings in meaning or through what happened but in the way meaning is disrupted. In this context, I will examine in this article the formal effects of trauma in literary texts precisely Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. I will examine the literariness of Trauma through a deep scrutiny of the metaphoric opacities and dense encrustations of Conrad’s convoluted style as well as narrative synopses and dislocations

**Key words:** Trauma theory, language, representation, belatedness, literariness.

According to Cathy Caruth, “the theory of trauma and the theory of a text intersect in the not knowing; a text about trauma should be seen as the most dense place of that entanglement of the knowing and the not knowing” (Personal Interview). Although many critics argue that texts about trauma are meant to communicate an event that is not fully assimilated as it happens, Caruth accents the impossibility to speak or simply retrieve what happened, for trauma as a term is inextricably intertwined with the not

knowing. Trauma is not a stable term; that is an event registered as traumatic. She argues that “no event can be predetermined as traumatic; Trauma is the structure of a delayed experience. Trauma is not determined by the event but by the effects”(interview). In other words, we cannot assume that a particular event, because it is so shocking, is inevitably traumatic. We learn about trauma through the speech of people or the lack of speech of people who went through those events. What Caruth refers to as “effects” is not only related to the behavior or actions of the traumatized subject or what is clinically known as PTSD; but there are linguistic effects as well.

In this light, the concern of many critics has recently been centered on past events or memories and how they are represented through language. Trauma theory and other poststructuralist and deconstructive theories have mainly focused on revealing the limits of language in representing the reality or truth of past atrocious events. Such a resistance to linguistic representation emanates from the “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world” once bearing witness to trauma (Caruth, 4). According to Caruth, as normal human beings we have what she calls the mechanisms of awareness that allow us to give a coherent, straightforward and epistemologically clear set of past events. However, when going through a traumatic event, those mechanisms of awareness or what she names as the cognitive, linguistic and time structure of the mind are dissociated; so the traumatized subject becomes incapable of retrieving past events in a clear and coherent way. In this context, Ulrich Baer regards trauma as “a twofold structural disjunction between an experience and its integration into narrative memory, understanding and communicability. All such experiences are located somewhere outside memory, yet within the psyche” (Qtd in Wolfreys, 129). In other words, trauma as an experience although resides within the psyche, remains unavailable to consciousness since it obliterates memory; that’s why it cannot be transmitted simply in language.

However, if trauma is an event that defies cognition, understanding and linguistic representation, how will we know about it through literary texts or the speech of people as Caruth argues? In what ways is a text symptomatic of trauma? Indeed, what she refers to is a representation that challenges the conventional modes of narration and referentiality; and a text is symptomatic, she contends, “not in the way it brings in meaning or through what happened but in the way meaning is disrupted” (personal interview). Such a collapse or crisis in representation is further elaborated in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*.

It is here, in the equally widespread and bewildering encounter with trauma- both in its occurrence and in the attempt to understand it- that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential (that is no longer based on simple models of experience and reference). Through the notion of trauma, I will argue, we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not. (11)



Permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not, involves the use of a specific language and signs that although ostensibly signify, do not represent directly what occurred. Trauma is thus communicated through the dense, inscrutable and repeated fuzzy rhetoric along with the disrupted time and plot structures that resist the reader's understanding. Caruth also refers to the *literariness* of trauma and argues that the different figures of speech used in trauma texts are not simply structured as "a way to systemize language around meaning" (Personal interview). Indeed, those figures of speech disrupt this systemization because they are not based on perception or cognition; rather, they refer to something that has no proper name. In other words, the disruptive and disjunctive modes of narrating reality bring in a different kind of truth that seems to be ostensibly articulated through language but does not have a proper and well perceived signified or referent; that is the traumatic event or what she calls the "death encounter".

Another aspect which is of paramount importance in the interpretation of trauma texts is what Freud calls "repetition compulsion". According to Caruth, the traumatic event cannot be fully seen or grasped at the moment of its occurrence, but is expressed belatedly through sudden and intrusive flashbacks, nightmares and repetitions. Trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way it's very unassimilated nature-the way it was precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth, 4). Such an event which is reiterated unconsciously remains, despite its repeated return, a trace or a presence that is at the same time an absence as Dominick Lacapra contends (43). Repetition occurs at the level of language as well. Texts about trauma are incessantly infused with dense vocabulary and words that are repeated but not necessarily explained (personal interview).

According to trauma theory, the meaning of words, names or any other linguistic representation of trauma events is not intrinsically entangled with the experience of trauma; rather, the different modes of semiotic representations and ramifications reveal a form of truth that defies the reader's understanding. Such a truth is in fact only literal. Caruth argues that "the truth that is articulable throughout rhetoric represents a different kind of truth because the truth of trauma is not the event but the not knowing of the event" (interview). Conventionally, historiography or the retrieval of past facts through language is meant to communicate or bring in a truth that is supposed to be palpable to the reader since it has an identified and clear referent. Texts about trauma, however, break down this subtle relation between language and reference and instead show the impossibility of revelation or representation of trauma. The latter can only be experienced but not communicated, though it seeks to be.

Such claims have their essence in Joseph Conrad's writings which lay bare a crisis of knowing or truth and reveal the limits of languages to convey or lead to totality and meaning. In his book *Writing History Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra argues that Conrad's style creates a confusion in the reader's mind; and he describes the novel *Heart of Darkness* as "a convergent route to a crisis of representation; which might conceivably be construed as a posttraumatic effect with 'aporia' itself as the textual figure of trauma" (33). Indeed, Conrad expresses his dilemma towards language as an appropriate means of representation in one of his letters to Ford Madox Ford in which he wrote "how fine it



would be if the thought did not escape- if the idea had a substance and words a magic power, if the invisible could be snared into a shape" (Conrad qtd in Schwarz, 5). For Conrad, language fails to make experience intelligible or understandable since experience cannot have a substance; that is a proper name or referent. The substance, whether written or spoken, does exist but escapes the subject's consciousness and perception and thus resists being fully fathomable. The impossibility of getting a meaning of past experiences in Conrad's texts emanates mainly from the excessive misty and fuzzy symbols, signs and figures that Conrad resorts to and which do not have present or identifiable attributes themselves.

This is indeed made clear in Marlow's claim in *Heart of Darkness* where he emphasizes the impossibility to linguistically retrieve or represent past horrific experiences of death, moral degradation and terror. According to Conrad "it is impossible to convey life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence, that which makes its truth, its meaning, its subtle and penetrating essence; it is impossible, we live as we dream alone" (p39). The correlation of the dream with life-sensation intersects with the claims of trauma theory. According to Caruth, trauma is an event that defies cognitive integration when it occurs but it returns belatedly and inadvertently through intrusive nightmares and flashbacks which bring the subject back to the very moment of the now and make the traumatized experience trauma over and over again. However, the return of the past in the present does not imply its assimilation. Caruth contends that "for history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that is not fully perceived as it occurs, or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth, p 5). Thus, the history of Trauma is but inaccessible.

In some of his claims, Conrad accents the role of art in bringing in the very truth of Man's essence; while in others retrieves to highlight the impossibility to access an identified present truth. In his preface to the *Nigger of the Narcissus* for instance, Conrad contends that:

Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colors, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential-their one illuminating and convincing- quality -the very truth of their existence.

However, the kind of truth that will bring justice to the world is indeed only formal which "its figures both illuminate their own workings and undermine them; it promises to reveal something and then shows us that that something (pure darkness) is what cannot be seen or shown, except as an absence"( Millerqtd in Murfin, 209). In other words, those truths although they seem to be unveiled at the same time remain foggish and obscure because of the inscrutable, dense encrustations and opaque metaphors used by Conrad. The kind of light they shed is in fact dim as Marlow contends in *Heart of Darkness* (p 15).

Indeed, many critics have examined Conrad's intricate and complex style. E.M Forster, for instance, describes Conrad's style as too fuzzy, vaporous and indirect. He argues that

“sentence after sentence discharges its smoke screen into our abashed eyes” (quoted in Murfin, p98); however, a few critics have related such a complexity in style to trauma theory since as Caruth explained “not any literary text that defies the reader’s understanding is considered a trauma text; a text is symptomatic of trauma in the way it exceeds any limits to a referent” (Personal interview). The second part of this paper therefore scrutinizes the formal effects and semiotic representations of trauma in Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness*,

### **Trauma, Witnessing and the Poetics of Limit in *Heart of Darkness*:**

Conrad’s convoluted style in *Heart of Darkness* is bluntly echoed in Marlow’s intricate and indirect way of telling that diverges from the straightforward and plain retrieval of past memories. Such an idea is best referred to in the metaphor used by the first person narrator in the novel to unveil how Marlow’s way of telling the story defies and differs from conventional modes of narration.

The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be expected), and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (*Heart of Darkness*, p8)

Marlow, who many critics consider as the alter ego of Joseph Conrad, accents the inaccessibility of meaning in his story since meaning is not inside; that is in the words, language or facts of the tale. Rather, it is outside, inextricably embedded in a referent which is itself as misty as the language used to refer to it. For Marlow, therefore, the history of trauma is but a remote history that is kept out of reach because there is no direct and identifiable proper name to it. Such a proper name or experience, although it might ostensibly exist, always escapes full understanding. It only brings out meaning “as a glow brings out a haze”. In other words, Conrad’s rhetoric does not unveil as much as it obscures or obscurely alludes to fathomable truths.

Marlow’s contiguous correlation of the meaning or truth of his story with “misty halos” in the second metaphor entails Conrad’s irony about the limit of language in conveying meaning. Halos are in fact a connotation for light, purity and decency; yet this light or meaning- that surrounds Marlow’s story as a halo surrounds the head of a saint or sun- is but hazy and dim. It is made visible only through specters of truth but not its essence. Therefore, the truth of history as traumatic becomes a ghost that haunts through its unintended return. It possesses the subject instead of being possessed by the subject’s consciousness. It is an experience that resides within the psyche yet outside consciousness. As Julian Wolfreys asserts in his article “Trauma, Testimony and Criticism”:

To read trauma is to register the sign of a secondary experience and recognition of the return of something spectral in the form of trace or sign signifying, but not representing directly that something, having occurred has left its mark, an inscription of sorts on the subject’s unconscious, and one

which moreover, can and does return repeatedly, though never as the experience as such. (133)

In his deconstructive reading of *Heart of Darkness*, J. Hillis Miller reads the metaphor the narrator used as an adumbration of both “parable” and “apocalypse” in narrative. It is a parable because, based on “real conditions” or Conrad’s experience in the Congo, it helps uncover the unseen or not known mystery; and an apocalypse since it unveils a mystery about the future (Miller qtd in Murfin, 211). However, he contends that Marlow’s story, which is supposed to throw light on unseen or veiled truths, is “indeterminate and undecidable in meaning” since the metaphors and figures of speech cannot be understood unless they have ‘supplemental figures’ to explain them; (Marlow’s tales bring out meaning as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness (208,209). Such a delayed decoding, as Ian Watt defines it, alienates the readers and listeners from the truth and meaning of Marlow’s experience and thus generates an ‘aporia’ of meaning; which fits into Cathy Caruth’s claim about trauma as “the structure of a delayed experience” that resists perception and cognition because of the incessant references its figurative language deploys.

In this same context, Dominick LaCapra in his book *History, Literature, Critical Theory* argues how the excessive use of some terms in *Heart of Darkness* renders them meaningless; and like Caruth, he accents the fact that words like ‘darkness’ and ‘heart of darkness’ do not have a fixed proper name or referent. According to LaCapra:

They apply to Africa and the Congo, but they also shift and come to apply to the “sepulchral city” of London- and even Europe or the “West” in general, as the journey up the Congo takes one back to the Thames and its dark “vistas”. At time the heart of darkness also assumes an ontological or quasi-transcendental status to signify the hole at the center of existence or the void in the symbolic order, evoking the traumatic death drive or Lacanian real. (34)

Such a collapse in referentiality is at the heart of Conrad’s convoluted and fuzzy style that alienates the reader from the meaning of the novel.

Trauma is also adumbrated in the terminology Marlow and Conrad’s narrator use in the novel. Conrad infuses and overburdens his verse with adjectives that obnubilate the meaning of Marlow’s experience rather than explain it. There are many ‘philosophical passages’, as F. R. Leavis calls them, filled with misty vocabulary that “often backfires and muffles” rather than helps unveil the horror (Leavis, 179). It is worth mentioning however that these adjectives are at the heart of the catastrophe. Although they do not unveil the horror, they transmit the trauma of the horror to the readers and listeners as well as lay bare the limits of language to communicate the depth and darkness of such a traumatic experience Marlow bears witness to. The word *inscrutable*, for instance, is repeated incessantly in the novel to describe the experience in the Congo: “the stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace; it was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention” (p 48), “the meaning of commonest phrase appears absolutely inscrutable” (p31), “as inscrutable as destiny” (p8). Describing his experience in the Congo, Marlow further explains:

It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me and into my thoughts. It was *somber, somber* enough, too- and pitiful- not extraordinary in anyway- not very clear either. No, not very clear, and it seemed to throw a kind of light. (p11).

The dichotomy of light and darkness in this thoughtful passage reveals the paradox of language as an effective means of representation; and which incessantly oscillates between revelation and convolution. Such a poetics of limits emanates mainly from an uncertainty embedding that truth.

The frequent and repeated use of other words like *inconceivable, unspeakable, indefinable, impenetrable, interminable, unseen, impossible, unknown, uncanny* etc... imbues the narrative yet "interrupts and disables the narrative at every point; such words speak to the obligation to read and the impossibility of reading" (Wolfrey, p). They illustrate the epistemological block the experience generates within the agent of testimony; and thus disclose the impossibility to access determinate knowledge; the latter is only present as an absence. Indeed, such a meticulous choice of lexis involves what DauriLaub refers to as a "collapse of witnessing" that Caruth relates to a "collapse of understanding" (Caruth, p7). In other words, the collapse of fully integrating the event in the mind by the witness hinders the registration of the memory of that event. "No trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche; instead, a void, a hole is found (Henry Krystal qtd in Caruth, p6); and therefore history as traumatic becomes an "impossible history" that the traumatized or witness cannot possess but are possessed by it (7).

In his book *Conrad the Novelist*, Albert Gerard contends that the incessant use of vaporous, inscrutable and epistemologically uncertain lexis is meant to convey the "haunting nature" of the novel and engage the reader in a moral uproar. He even compares the novel to a dream. "*Heart of Darkness* is ambiguous as dream is ambiguous; it is powerful precisely to the extent that it is not precise" (Gerard, p38). Marlow thus does not speak the truth of horror but transmits its effects through the very choice of the vocabulary in the narrative that insistently holds back knowledge or information. Such an effect of a haunting truth that possesses and returns repeatedly like a nightmare or hallucination entails what Caruth calls a 'crisis of truth'

The dreams, hallucinations and thoughts are absolutely literal, unassimilable to associative chains of meaning. It is this literality as we have said that possesses the receiver and resists psychoanalytical interpretation and cure. Yet the fact that this scene or thought is not a possessed knowledge, but itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits, often produces a deep uncertainty as to its very truth. Such a crisis of truth extends beyond the question of individual cure and asks how we in this era can have access to our own historical experience, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access. (Caruth, p5, 6)

The dream like effect is indeed mentioned by Marlow several times in the novel when describing his experience in Africa. He describes the past as something that "came in the

shape of an unrestful and noisy dream, remembered with wonder amongst the overwhelming realities of this strange world of plants and water and silence" (*Heart of Darkness*, p48). The past comes back unwillingly "when you have not a moment to spare to yourself" (48); and the dream is as obscure as the reality; there are no threads of meaning in it. Marlow refers to the effect of what he calls "seaman unpardonable sin that no man know of it" which years after, it returns in a dream.; such a sin makes "you wake up at night, think of it and go hot and cold all over" (p48). Therefore, the idea of the return of trauma is made obvious in the novel; yet that return is in itself ineffable.

The limits of language to speak or communicate trauma simply implies the revisiting of language as a proper means of representation. Indeed, in regard to trauma and its depiction through language, one may assume that texts about trauma are, as Caruth argues "a pure symptom in their reenactment of trauma rather than communication" (personal interview). The excessive inaccessibility to meaning or a pure referent in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* engages the reader into the very moment of the traumatic event; and therefore brings in such a horrific history not through telling directly what happened but via effects.

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## Representations of Psychological Trauma in Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetry

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### Abstract

In *Trauma and Recovery*, the American psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman explores three symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder which are respectively hyper arousal, intrusion, and constriction. Herman defines hyper arousal as the human system of self preservation going into permanent alert, as if danger might return at any moment. In this state, the traumatised subject is in persistent expectation of danger. He/ She startles easily and sleeps poorly. In intrusion, however, the victim relives the traumatic event as if it were happening in the present. In constriction, the trauma survivor becomes powerless and helpless. Herman describes constriction as the numbing response of surrender. The present paper illustrates these aspects of psychological trauma in autobiographical confessional modern American poetry. As a survivor of childhood physical and sexual abuse, Anne Sexton exposes her story of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder via her confessional mode and makes her poems a journey into emotional distress. Her uncontrollable fear and paranoia in "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn", her sleep disturbance in "Lullaby", and her helplessness, hopelessness, and state of unconsciousness in "Flee on Your Donkey" reveal a lot about her past trauma. Her poems encompass a variety of feelings, thoughts, and moods, all featuring the state of a traumatised persona. Still, her poems become a textual locus for the interplay of trauma and creativity. Creative expression is used as a means for recovery. Sexton's confessional art is exploited not only to expose but also to heal those tormenting traumatic wounds.

In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, the American psychiatrist Judith Lewis Herman studies psychological trauma and explores three symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which are respectively hyper arousal, intrusion, and constriction. Herman states that hyper arousal "reflects the persistent expectation of danger" (35). Indeed, "after a traumatic experience, the human system of self -preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the



danger might return at any moment . . . The traumatised person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly" (35). The second symptom of PTSD, intrusion, "reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment" (35). In intrusion, the traumatic experience is relived by the trauma survivor. Illusions, hallucinations, and intense distress form the major hallmarks of intrusion. Constriction, however, "reflects the numbing response of surrender" (35). In constriction, the trauma survivor engages in a state of dissociation. Herman explains that "when a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender . . . The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness" (42). One of the ways to escape pain is to engage in trance like states. Another way is to detach the self from the world around him/her in order to avoid images and feelings triggering the traumatic event. The traumatised subject's major feelings in constriction are those of isolation and estrangement.

The American artist Anne Sexton was a survivor of Trauma. She was a victim of childhood physical and sexual abuse. Throughout her life, she showed dramatic signs of psychological trauma and she was recurrently hospitalized in mental asylums for recovery. Psychiatrists assume that she had a PTSD. As a poet, she did not turn a blind eye to her story with emotional disorder. She openly and unabashedly handles the very private issue of her PTSD and writes a body of poetry on trauma. Her poems are textual representation of her states of hyper arousal, intrusion, and constriction. Sleeplessness, helplessness, hopelessness, loneliness, fear, paranoia form the predominant aspects of PTSD that are exploited in her poems. Because much of her poetry is autobiographical confessional, many of her poems record her personal feelings and complex thoughts, all suggesting that her life was defined by trauma.

Hyper arousal in Sexton's poetry is revealed through some psychosomatic complaints including sleeping difficulty and stomach ache. In this vein, Herman postulates that "psychosomatic complaints could be understood as resulting from chronic arousal of the autonomic nervous system" (36). "Flee on Your Donkey", from *Live or Die* (1966), illustrates one of these troubles emanating from a state of hyper arousal. The feeling of hyper alertness in the poem is expressed predominantly in somatic terms. Indeed, The persona's permanent alert produces stomach ache. Her wistful thoughtfulness and melancholy are bitterly revealed in the poem through the statement, "it is my stomach that makes me suffer". The physical pain she suffers from at the level of her internal body organ, her stomach, highlights her over pensiveness and vigilance for the return of danger.

Sexton's poem "Lullaby", from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), sheds the light on another physical or somatic symptom of PTSD, which is sleeplessness. In this context, Herman states that "people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder take longer to fall asleep", they are sensitive to certain stimuli, and particularly, "more sensitive to noise" (36). They "do have an extreme startle response to unexpected stimuli, as well as intense reaction to specific stimuli associated with the traumatic event" (36). To highlight the speaker's state of hyper arousal, "Lullaby" handles the issue of sleep disorder resulting from abnormal sensitiveness to darkness and noise. The speaker is easily startled by the gloomy atmosphere around her. She is irritated by the "summer evening", "the locked screens", "the faded curtains", as well as the "goat calls in his dreams". Those small provocations stimulate the speaker's melancholic thoughtfulness and hyper alert; and consequently, create sleep disturbance. The expectation of an undesirable threat and the thought that someone is going to do harm causes sleep disorder. The helpless sleepless traumatised subject in "Lullaby" is compared to a "lost butterfly" that "moan[s] in secret" and seeks to escape pain.

The second symptom of PTSD, intrusion, is given prominence in Sexton's "Noon Walk On the Asylum Lawn", from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960). Discomfort, panic attack, and paranoia emphasise the speaker's re-experience of the traumatic event. The emotional distress



as well as the illusions and hallucinations lived in the asylum lawn stresses trauma intrusion into the survivor's life. The poem is a piece of intrusive recollections of the traumatic event.

"Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn", in particular, masterfully sheds the light on psychological trauma and projects a scene of panic attack which is defined as "fear that occurs when there is nothing to be afraid of and, therefore, at an inappropriate time" (Barlow and Durand 123). This poem, indeed, presents the speaker's anxious emotions and gloomy mood during her journey on the asylum lawn in spite of the serenity of the whole atmosphere. Surprisingly, the persona's noon walk is filled with irrational and uncontrollable fears and an extreme hostility to the environment around her. In this respect, it has been argued that "what should be a rare moment of freedom within confinement becomes a dangerous and threatening journey into the outside world" (Schmidt and Warner 194). It would be said that the patient's passage through a phase of panic and emotional distress in a natural setting that is supposed to provide her with comfort and relaxation emphasises trauma intrusion into the life of its victim.

In addition to panic attack, paranoia is another symptom of intrusion tackled in "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn". It has been assumed that "The main voice in [this] [poem] is a paranoid one" (Colburn 104). The speaker's paranoia is mainly detected through her irrational suspiciousness of the natural elements surrounding her. Her paranoia and abnormal fear are accompanied with the development of psychotic symptoms of psychological disorder namely hallucination. Traumatic events intrude into the consciousness of the trauma survivor as hallucinations. The following lines- "the grass speaks", "I hear green chanting all day" ;besides, "the sky breaks / it sags and breathes upon my face" - illustrate the persona's hallucinations, underline her chaotic vision and imbalanced faculties of perception, and justify trauma intrusion. Interestingly enough, the visual and auditory imageries used in the poem spot the light on Herman's view that "traumatic memories [...] are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (38). Yet, the persona's paranoia and overwhelming anxiety are also conveyed through her exaggerated distrustfulness of the other and the whole world around her. This is highlighted through the following lines; "in the presence of mine enemies, mine enemies / the world is full of enemies". Obviously, those moments of hallucination are intensified by the presence of the enemy who plays a major part in the traumatic event. The closing line "there is no safe place" stresses Sexton's vulnerability and unwarranted fright. She feels trapped by trauma in every corner of the asylum. "As the speaker walks further and further into the asylum lawn, the sense of anxiety increases. Danger is present everywhere; sun, trees, grass, and sky are all threatening and conspiratorial forces, and this moment of freedom, of being let out onto the grounds for a walk, quickly turns into a confinement as complete and frightening as anything offered by the ward" (Schmidt and Warner 195). Briefly, paranoia, panic, and anxiety articulate all together in "Noon Walk on the Asylum Lawn" to form intrinsic signs of the speaker's reliving of the past traumatic experience.

"Flee on Your Donkey" likewise gives prominence to the symptom of intrusion. In the light of this poem, Sexton further underlines how "the traumatic moment [is] encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, [mainly] as flashbacks during waking states" (Herman 37). The speaker indeed reveals, "awake, I memorised dreams". She bitterly confesses that intrusive memories revisit her in a state of wakefulness. When awake, she becomes a subject of recurrent distressing dreams during which the traumatic event is re-created, re-lived, and re-internalised. The metaphor of the "dredger" is significant in the way it indirectly compares the trauma survivor to a means that carries heavy burden, emphasising by that the thickness and awfulness of such dreams. The persona holds those heavy memories "like an old woman with arthritic fingers", which stresses the extent to which intrusive memories are sources of acute psychological and physical suffering for the victim. Burdened with pain, those "hands [are] swinging down like hooks / to pull dreams up out

of their cage". Yet, the victim is still haunted by her dreams which are still entrenched in her memory.

The third aspect of PTSD, which is constriction, is highlighted in "Lullaby" through emphasising the speaker's dependence on the sleeping pills to overcome her trauma memories. In "Lullaby", the pill, according to the poet, generates a magic and "soothing" (Martin 123) effect. The persona's pill, as a matter of fact, relieves her from pain, quietens her, and lulls her to sleep. "While the drugs provide comfort, in the form of calm or sleep, they also numb, so that a sleeping pill becomes 'a splendid pearl [which] floats her out of [her] self' "(Martin 123). For these pleasant and satisfactory effects, the persona feels compulsively attached to her pills. When the speaker says, "my sleeping pill", the use of the possessive pronoun "my" is quite significant. It sounds as if Sexton wants to stress her personal possession of and inextricable attachment to the pills. In Sexton's eyes, the sleeping pill is something that she owns like a property or wealth, and this is clearly mirrored through her attempt to depict it as "a splendid pearl". All in all, the poem is liable to reflect the image of a helpless, powerless, and desperate traumatised subject who totally surrenders to the charming, comforting, and numbing effects the sleeping pills evoke to resolve her struggle with her upsetting emotions and anxieties. "Lullaby" is the poem that perfectly projects one of Sexton's emotional and physical complaints and the way she seeks to avoid it.

Another sign of constriction is the speaker's engagement in trance states. In this vein, it has been estimated that "in an effort to numb the pain from traumatic thoughts and intrusive symptoms, victims of sexual violence may experience periods of dissociation. The mind constructs a safe haven in the form of a trance-like state which can last for minutes to hours and allows the person relief from thinking or being reminded of the trauma" (Gayle Payne 16). In "Flee On Your Donkey", Sexton discloses her habit of falling into states of unconsciousness when she reveals, "I spent most of my time, / a stranger, / damned and in trance", divulging by that her story with PTSD. Accordingly, going into trance was "one common aspect of Sexton's behaviour" (Pritzker 556). In order to provide a deep insight into what could happen during the trance episode, she confesses, "in trance I could be any age, / voice, gesture- all turned backward / like a drugstore clock". The altered state of consciousness, indeed, is characterized by "distortion of reality, including depersonalization, derealization, and change in the sense of time" (Herman 43). The trance state is a behaviour that arises from a revolutionary spirit that struggles to overcome its psychological pain and revitalize itself.

"Flee On Your Donkey" illustrates one of the behavioural signs of constriction and reflects the numbing response of surrender. This poem enacts a trance-like state or a "metaphorical death" (Skorczewski 75) that depicts the persona imagining herself dead. The following lines are worth taking into consideration since they exemplify Sexton's trance state, and consequently, imply her effort to numb the pain originating from her traumatic thoughts and intrusive signs:

Once, outside your office,  
I collapsed in the old fashioned swoon  
between the illegally parked cars.  
I threw myself down,  
pretending death for eight hours.  
I thought I had died

-----

I lay there  
Like an overcoat

That someone had thrown away. (124-130, 134-136)

This stanza illustrates Sexton's state of dissociation; or using Herman's terms, "a state of detached calm in which terror, rage and pain dissolve" (42). The "eight- hour" journey of total unconsciousness is referred to by "the old fashioned swoon". Throughout that journey, the persona's experience with unconsciousness seems to be so deep and real that she stood motionless and useless "like an old overcoat / that someone had thrown away". The repetition of expressions such as "threw myself" and "thrown away" emphasise the speaker's helplessness, hopelessness, and surrender. To lay down "pretending death for eight hours" accentuates the numbing response of surrender. The way Sexton stood for long hours immobilized and completely absorbed in her trance state provides temporary relief.

Another hallmark of constriction is withdrawal. In order to keep safe, trauma survivors avoid places and people that arouse memories of the trauma. They withdraw from the world and constrict in relationships. In "Flee on Your Donkey", the speaker chooses to be detached or estranged not only from the mental institution where she lives but also from the family and the whole world around her. She directly confesses that she "spent most of [her] time" "stranger" and "damned". She feels withdrawn from that monotonous "same old crowd" and "same ruined scene". The opening lines of the poem powerfully contribute to the idea that withdrawal becomes inescapable and inevitable in the victim's life. "Because there was no other place / to flee to", the speaker decided "to come back to the scene of the disordered senses" which is the asylum. The literal contradiction between the verb "flee" which connotes freedom and independence and the expression "come back to the scene of the disordered senses" which suggests restriction and enclosure intensifies Sexton's preference of detachment from the world. This is further revealed through the prisoner metaphor. Sexton, indeed, bitterly compares herself to a "poor" "prisoner" who "fell in love with jail".

Still, as a survivor of childhood trauma Sexton used confessional poetry as therapy. Indeed, "this dramatic first- person persona [is] inextricable from the 'real' poet and imbued with a sense of vulnerability, which stems from the candid way in which the self is examined" (Miller 4). Relying on "an explicit female persona" (Mc Clatchy 223), Sexton used writing as a therapeutic tool to avoid psychological pain. In other words, she followed the road of art as a means to liberate her psychic self from the confinements of distress and hopelessness and go beyond every tormenting traumatic experience. Confessionalism, in particular, formed the basis that makes art a means of therapy. "In his analysis entitled 'The Confessional Poets', Robert Phillips asserts that '[a]ll confessional art [...] is a means of killing the beasts which are within us , those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be haunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed'" (Cribbs 2). It has been postulated that Sexton herself used her artistic talents and skills to "fit within the confessional tradition of 'killing the beasts within'" (Cribbs 22). Sexton endorses the strategy of poetry therapy for recovery.

In the same context, in "Creativity Born of Trauma" from *Mended by the Muse: Creative Transformations of Trauma*, Sophia Richman postulates that "one of the most powerful and effective routes toward emotional healing is through creative expression"(12). She provides an extensive definition to creative expression which is "to work through one's pain: to give it a tangible form, to release it, to communicate it, to make sense of it, and to extract some meaning from it" (12). Sexton makes her poems a free space for an unhampered interplay of her complex feelings and intricate thoughts. As she releases her pain from her psyche and communicates it through words and images, she gets rid of it. The textual representation of psychological trauma functions as a means for emotional healing.

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# Can the Traumatized Speak? Moon Orchid and BaBa's Traumas of Gender Oppression and Racism at "the Western Palace:" Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980)

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## Abstract

Trauma refers to a wound or wounds that bring(s) about psychological suffering. Although this suffering is located within the psyche, it can manifest itself through physical reactions like paralysis or inability to talk (Shoshana Felmen). Recent studies have shown that 'trauma's genesis,' as Geoffrey Hartman calls it, is not always the outcome of childhood sexual abuse. Close examination of writings produced by hyphenated women writers in the context of the United States of America leads to a new conception of trauma, which centralizes the two notions of gender oppression and racism. Maxine Hong Kingston is a Chinese American woman writer who uses the talk-story technique to reveal unclaimed experiences of her female ancestors' oppressive marginalization by the patriarchal Chinese American community and the forgotten, or rather, denied history of her male ancestors' enslavement in America, referred to in the title with the phrase "the Western Palace." The aim of this paper is to explore the traumatic factors and experiences of Moon Orchid, Kingston's aunt whose story Kingston relates in the vignette "At the Western palace" from *the Woman Warrior* and to delineate the traumatic elements that affect Baba, Kingston's father for whose story she devotes the two vignettes "The Father from China" and "the American Father" from *China Men*. The investigation of trauma in the stories of these ancestors is done while examining a possibility for these traumatized subjects to speak of their traumas.

## Introduction

Trauma refers to a wound or wounds that bring(s) about psychological suffering. Although this suffering is located within the psyche, it can manifest itself through physical reactions like paralysis or inability to talk. Recent studies have shown that 'trauma's genesis,' as Geoffrey Hartman calls it, is not always the outcome of childhood

sexual abuse. Close examination of writings produced by hyphenated women writers in the context of the United States of America leads to a new conception of trauma, which centralizes the two notions of gender oppression and racism which are interspersed in everyday life experience. Maxine Hong Kingston is a Chinese American woman writer who uses the talk-story technique to reveal unclaimed everyday-life experiences of her female ancestors' oppressive marginalization by the patriarchal Chinese American community and the forgotten, or rather, denied history of her male ancestors' enslavement in America, referred to in the title with the phrase "the Western Palace."

Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid, and her father, Tom Hong, whom she refers to as BaBa, move geographically to the United States where they are subjected to gender oppression and racism which lead to their traumatization. Their trauma is diagnosed through psychic as well as physical reactions among which are paralysis, language obliteration and silence whether a willed, evading reaction or an unwilled forced one. The aim of this paper is to explore the traumatic factors and experiences of Moon Orchid, Kingston's aunt whose story Kingston relates in the vignette "At the Western palace" from *the Woman Warrior* (1976) and to delineate the traumatic elements that affect Baba, Kingston's father for whose story she devotes the two vignettes "The Father from China" and "The American Father" from *China Men* (1980). The investigation of trauma in the stories of these ancestors starts with a psychological conception of trauma and is done while examining a possibility for these traumatized subjects to speak of their traumas. It equally aims to support the idea that trauma is not gender bound.

### **1- Trauma Psychologically Considered**

Trauma is a widespread term notwithstanding the fact that it has recently grown into a theory and is given due emphasis on the part of psychologists, among them Dominick La Capra, Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth, and Shoshana Felman who approach the study of trauma from different perspectives. Referring to these psychiatrists' work accounts for the various definitions or readings of trauma that follow here. Caruth states: "Trauma is a response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena"(90). This quotation stresses the idea of physical and psychological discontinuity in the traumatized person, which means that the traumatic experience causes a breach in the traumatized psyche and hinders the person's ability to resume his pre-trauma life. Psychiatrist Shoshana Felman defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience that cannot be fully apprehended or processed" (Felman and Laub qtd. in Parker 5). Traumatic occurrences are those that "have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference " (Ibid). Traumatic events are those that resist entering the sphere of cognition and resist assessment by memory. Cathy Caruth likens them to gaps (qtd. in Winslow 2) that can be filled in by means of interpretation.

On the website of The American Psychology Association, trauma is defined as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea" (1). This emotional response is most often a result of a



“terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster” (Ibid). The latter phrase put between inverted commas limits the range of factors that have the potential of entailing traumatic effects, which may lessen the credibility of diagnosing Kingston’s two ancestors as traumatized because they do not face terrible accidents like rape or at least Kingston does not state that explicitly in her narratives. However, I think that reading trauma in literature is reading a narrative about a psychological violent experience that causes suffering. I find an echo of this idea in Hartman’s quotation: “Trauma study’s radical aspect comes to the fore less in its emphasis on acts of violence like war and genocide than when it draws attention to ‘familiar’ violence such as rape, and the abuse of women and children. Above all, it does not neglect the explosive nature of emotion and daily hurt” (1). He adds: “a situation that leaves you overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic, even if it doesn’t involve physical harm” (APA 1). Relying on these quotations it is feasible to talk about trauma caused by hurts in everyday life, relying always on the notion of suffering, notwithstanding the absence of physical pain. I support my point here with Hartman’s “[...] it is clear that accidents too—that is apparently simple, daily events—uncover, or are drawn into an atmosphere of trauma” (5). Everyday occurrences can be sources of trauma as long as the people who go through them find themselves as a result prey to acute suffering.

The notion of trauma is closely related to the idea of displacement, and Moon Orchid in the vignette “At the Western Palace” is displaced geographically and mentally. I explore this severe suffering relying on what Hartman calls the trauma “genesis-moment,” that is the moment the accident happens. Hartman puts forth: “Talking about the traumatic event we have many questions to ask, ‘What happened?’ ‘Where did the trouble begin?’ ‘Why is my fantasy life murky and fearful?’ ‘Why can’t I be rational *and* imaginative?’ We try to get back to a genesis-moment that seems to have started a fatal chain of reaction and manacled both body and mind (2). These questions serve to scrutinize the traumatizing culprit, limit its genesis in terms of time and investigate possible reactions to it on the part of the traumatized.

## **2-Moon Orchid’s Trauma of Gender Oppression**

Among the female characters Kingston tells about in her first memoir is the youngest aunt, Moon Orchid. She is younger than Brave Orchid, Kingston’s mother, who entices her to move to America. The older sister’s plan is to help her younger sister get her estranged husband back. He has established his life as an Americanized man, has married an American woman and has had American children. Brave Orchid reminds her sister of the myth of Emperor of the Earth and his four wives located in the four different points of the compass. She equates her sister with ‘Empress of the East’ (Ibid 130) that is first wife as opposed to his second American wife who is supposedly the ‘Empress of the West. “Are you ready to go see your husband and claim what is yours?” (*The Woman Warrior* 129) This is how Brave Orchid reminds her sister that she has a mission to accomplish, and that is meeting her husband and regaining her place as first wife. Investigating trauma in the case of the aunt requires scrutiny of her personality so as to delineate the factors that make of her a traumatized subject.

In the eyes of Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid is silly. She is surprised that “after thirty years she could still get annoyed at her sister’s silliness” (*The Woman Warrior* 110). The kinds of gifts she brings to her nephews and nieces such as paper dolls, jewelry, shoes



reflect her superficial character. She is happy moving around and exploring the house. The same night of her arrival Brave Orchid wants to talk over Moon Orchid's "problem" with her husband – and I put the word problem between quotation marks because it is Brave Orchid who considers her sister's separation from her husband a problem that should be fixed. Moon Orchid did not think of moving to America, let alone meeting her husband.

She is satisfied with her life in Hong Kong in spite of being alone. She is even thankful to her husband as he keeps sending her money. "For thirty years she had been receiving money from America. But she had never told him that she wanted to come to the United States. She waited for him to suggest it, but he never did. Nor did she tell him that her sister had been working for years to transport her here" (*The Woman Warrior* 114). Now that she is in the same land as her husband she is seized by fear at the idea of meeting him. When Brave Orchid suggests letting the Americanized husband know about the arrival of his first Chinese wife her "eyes got big like a child's. 'I shouldn't be here,' she said" (*Ibid*). This answer reveals the extent to which Chinese women internalize the patriarchal code of conduct. Moon Orchid feels the wrongness of her coming to the United States without the knowledge of her husband. A few lines later she says: "I'm scared [...] I want to go back to Hong Kong" (*Ibid* 115). This fear causes her to oscillate between cooperating with and refraining from acting on her sister's plan. She tries as much as she can to avoid discussing the matter of her husband.

Days pass by and each time Moon Orchid manages to avoid travelling to Los Angeles. But stubborn Brave Orchid finally takes her on a terrifying journey during which Moon Orchid feels scared and terrified and keeps blaming herself for being in the wrong place (*The Woman Warrior* 133). All the previous feelings of worry, fear and guilt pave the way for the great shocking moment that is the meeting with the husband.

Arriving at the place where the husband works, Moon Orchid feels paralyzed. "Oh! I can't move. My knees are shaking so much. I won't be able to walk" (*Ibid*). This is what Emma Parker insists on saying; "The sense of paralysis [is] fundamental to traumatic experience" (6). Recognizing Moon Orchid's terror, her sister gives her the following advice: "You have to compose yourself" (*The Woman Warrior* 133). The use of the verb "compose" intimates the idea of shattering or being shattered. Moon Orchid's self is shattered with each step toward the meeting with her husband; this fragmentation or shattering is what Felman and Laub, psychoanalysts, refer to as "shattering effects of trauma" (Cited in Parker 10).

The self shattering deepens when the husband comes:

Her husband looked at her. And recognized her. 'You?' [...] 'What are you doing here?' But *all she did was open and shut her mouth without any words coming out*. 'Why are you here?' he asked, eyes wide. *Moon Orchid covered her face with one hand and motioned no with the other [...]* He looked directly at Moon Orchid the way the savages looked, looking for lies. 'What do you want?' he asked. *She shrank from his stare; it silenced her crying* (*The Woman Warrior* 138) (emphasis added).

Moon Orchid's traumatization happens gradually starting with opening her eyes wide and motioning no, to covering her face, to shrinking in her seat to, finally, silence. Moon Orchid also feels ashamed when her husband tells her that he cannot accept her in his

house because important American people visit him and she cannot talk to them. She covers her face and “wished she could also hide her dappled hands. Her husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and she must look like a ghost from China” (*The Woman Warrior* 139). Moon Orchid suffers oblivion on the part of her husband: “You became people in a book I had read a long time ago, he said to the two women” (*Ibid* 139). For his new American life there is no space for ghostly people to intrude from the past or from China. This is what Parker suggests with the idea of being “unwritten or written off” (2) from the history of the family. The pre-meeting fears coupled with the post-meeting shock are what constitute the traumatizing element. A few months later when Brave Orchid phones her sister to know how she is doing, Moon Orchid answers in a whisper “I can’t talk now [...] they’re listening. Hang up quickly before they trace you,” (*Ibid* 140) and she hangs up. Then, a letter sent by her daughter discloses the cause of Moon Orchid’s unusual behavior:

Moon Orchid had become afraid. Moon Orchid said that she had overheard Mexican ghosts plotting on her. She had been creeping along the baseboards and peeping out windows. Then she had asked her daughter to help her find an apartment at the other end of Los Angeles, where she was now hiding. Her daughter visited her every day, but Moon Orchid kept telling her, “Don’t come see me because the Mexican ghosts will follow you to my new hiding place. They are watching your house” (*The Woman Warrior* 140).

Brave Orchid, a former doctor, diagnoses her sister as being ill; “This fear is sickness” (*Ibid*) and sends for her. She does come disguised though. Brave Orchid tweaks her sister’s ears to help her frightened soul get back home and stop wandering among ghosts but to no avail.

Brave Orchid reports: “Moon Orchid had misplaced herself, her spirit (her ‘attention’ Brave Orchid calls it) scattered all over the world” (*Ibid* 141). Moon Orchid’s case exposes a case of a self shattered by chains of suffering that make her more and more self-confined. This is consonant with the following quotation: “psychic disorder is presented as a disjunction not only from societal norms but from a presumed authentic self” (Braun 1). Moon Orchid does not only distance herself – even though unaware – from her family and relatives but also from her previous self. Therefore, she becomes alienated and agoraphobic. Her behavior testifies to her falling prey to psychosis. For instance, she goes about switching the lights off as when there are air raids, or moving inside her sister’s house and collecting the family pictures and hiding them for fear the family members would be traced. The most peculiar thing she does is cry whenever one of Brave Orchid’s children goes out to school. She thinks that anyone who goes out will not return.

Brave Orchid bitterly recognizes that her sister *is* mad and that she is hosting a ghost instead of a sister (*Ibid* 144). Victorian psychiatrist Henry Maudsley describes the insane man as ‘alienated from his normal self and from his kind’, and ‘so self-regarding a self as to be incapable of right regard to the not-self’ (qtd. in Braun 1). Moon Orchid slips into another world and keeps telling the same story; she thus testifies to being traumatized. Cathy Caruth asserts that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (qtd. in Parker 5). Moon Orchid is possessed by a strange idea that alienates her each time farther and farther away from reality. She is put in an asylum for

mentally-disturbed people and she likes the place as nobody leaves. All the people there stay and they talk the same language as she does.

Retrieving Hartman's three questions and applying them to the case of Moon Orchid helps to delineate the traumatizing event and its effects. The first question is "what happened?" to which is given the following answer: Moon Orchid becomes mad and so she falls back into a logic of her own, dispossessed of language and therefore stripped of power. To the second question "Where did the trouble begin?" I reckon that the trouble begins with forcing Moon Orchid into meeting her husband. This she does unwillingly under the influence of her sister Brave Orchid. In answer to the third question, "why [is] her fantasy life murky and fearful?" One should say that Moon Orchid suffers a sort of phobia because she cannot accept in her cognition the outcomes of her own "displacement," that is intruding in an alien environment which is America, following the illusion that her husband would welcome her. Furthermore, she is unable to assert herself within the alien environment. She cannot take up all this considering the weak personality that she has. Caruth states: "Trauma is an experience or event so painful that the mind is unable to cognitively grasp it" (qtd. in *Fantasyecho* 1). This is exactly what happens to Moon Orchid. She is neither able to accept the pain nor endure it. In addition to this, there is the ever-binding Chinese patriarchy that fosters the model of Moon Orchid, weak and speechless. Moon Orchid's emotional trauma interspersed with pain and tragedy is mainly caused by the oppressive patriarchal system that frames women in general as slaves.

### **3-Baba's Trauma of Racism**

The second ancestor that I depict as traumatized is Kingston's father, whose traumatic symptoms I intend to delineate by comparing his life in China with his life in America, which is what accounts for my choice of the two chapters, "The Father from China" and "The American Father." In China the father is depicted as different from the rest of his siblings. When he is born his grandmother announces his being different, which in this case acquires a positive dimension. Grandmother Ah Po says:

'Your little brother is different from any of you. Your generation has no boy like this one. Come. Look.' She unwrapped the baby to show how skinny he was. She uncurled his fists, and his brothers touched the wrinkles inside, looked at their own wrinkles. 'Look at the length of his hands and fingers,' [...] 'This kind of hand were made for holding pens. This is the boy we'll prepare for the Imperial Examinations' (*China Men* 11).

The father is special; his grandmother offers him the four valuable things which are ink, inkslab, paper and brush, things that he needs for his future education. The teachers who come to teach him express their appreciation of his intelligence. When he grows, he writes poetry and is teased by his brothers as being "poetry addict" (*Ibid* 19) and passes the Imperial Examination. He becomes a village teacher. He teaches children poetry and reads Chinese classics to them. He is the scholar type in his family, different from his brothers who are mostly the peasant type, which is why he is valued among his family. When he shows an interest in the Gold Mountain and its stories and a desire to take the same trip to America, his brothers and uncles who are Gold Mountain veterans laugh at him. The uncles and brothers tease him because they know he is not the one to enter the Gold Mountain, skinny as he is. The Gold Mountain needs muscles. Kingston writes:

The travelers teased him 'Hoo! So he thinks he can walk about the West posing as a scholar [...] he'll saunter up to the Immigration Demon and say, 'I'm an academician. Hand over my visa.' "They'll clap him in jail for lying." "How are you going to prove that you are a scholar? Open up your skull and show them your brains?" "Just because he's skinny and too weak for physical labor, he thinks the white demons will say he's obviously a scholar. But they can't tell a teacher's body from a laborer's body."

"I have a diploma"

"Huh. He thinks they make laws to search out scholars to teach them and rule them. Listen stupid, nobody gets to be classified 'Scholar.' You can't speak English; you're illiterate, no scholar, no visa. 'Coolie,' Simple test" (*China Men* 42). This is the first degradation of the father whereby his status as a scholar shrinks to that of an illiterate. The very journey to the Gold Mountain is actually a journey to the unknown. "Various futures raced through his mind: walking the plank, drowning, growing old in jail, being thrown overboard in chains, flogged to tell where others were hiding, hung by the neck, returning to China- all things that happened to caught chinamen" (*Ibid* 45). The criteria for ranking people according to their intellectual levels are subverted when this father actually enters America, and from that moment of intruding in an alien territory, he is alienated and feels that this distancing is relegating him farther and farther down from his privileged status in China. Landing on American soil inaugurates the father's bitter experience of emasculation. For want of physical strength needed for work in plantations or in railroads or else in mines, the father unwillingly takes up the debasing job of a laundryman cleaning and ironing piles of dirty clothes. A good illustration would be the following song:

Years pass and I let drop but one homesick tear.

A laundry lamp burns at midnight.

The laundry business is low, you say.

Washing out blood that stinks like brass-

Only a Chinaman can debase himself so.

But who else wants to do it? Do you want it?

Ask for the Chinaman, Ask for the Chinaman (*China Men* 60).

At the end of a workday, Ed, Kingston's father American name, and his associates are exhausted. They sleep on the same tables they use to iron clothes. Suffering an emotional void that even dancing with blond women does not remedy, Ed decides to send for his wife, Brave Orchid, to join him in the Gold Mountain. He realizes the bitter reality that he has come to a land with no women. Preventing Chinese women from joining their husbands for half a century is deliberately meant to intensify the stereotype of chinamen as being asexual (Wong and Santa Ana 173). The racial discriminatory practices lead to "bachelor societies of single Asian men who performed 'feminized' forms of work-such as laundry, restaurant, and other service-sector jobs" (Lowe qtd. in Wong and Santa Ana 177). Kingston's father goes through a chain of painful experiences. He is swindled of his share in the laundry and starts a job in a gambling house which unfortunately is closed and he finds himself a target for his wife's scolding, "You piece of liver. You poet. You scholar. What's the use of a poet and a scholar on the Gold Mountain? You're so skinny in this country. You have to be tough...Can't speak English.

Now, you've lost the gambling job and the land in China" (*China Men* 247). The outcome of a succession of humiliating failures is the father's reticence. The question is does he chose to be silent or is he forced into silence?

Kingston asks her father about his past but, fully aware that he is the taciturn type, suggests that he correct her in case she gets him wrong: "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (*Ibid* 10). Kingston states moments when her father lapses into a silent world or shows signs of psychic disturbance. "You punished us by not talking. You rendered us invisible, gone. [...] You kept up a silence for weeks and months." She adds "I want to know what makes you scream and curse and what you are thinking when you say nothing and why when you talk, you talk differently from mother" (*Ibid* 10). I would say that the father's silence seems to be a willful choice, except that a quotation like the following one would suggest silence is not willful. "You screamed wordless male screams that jolted the house upright and staring in the middle of the night. 'It's BaBa again' MaMa would move from bed to bed. 'That was just BaBa having a dream' [...] Worse than the swearing and the nightly screams were your silences" (*China Men* 8). Emma Parker states that "a reference to nightmares likewise indicates unconscious distress" (6). And so the father is diagnosed as suffering nightmares. Kingston adds "you say with the few words and the silences: No stories, No past. No China" (*Ibid* 9). This alludes to the idea of gaps which are actually moments of silence that only interpretation can fill in. The degradation from the status of a scholar and from the job of a teacher to the status of an ignorant person and the job of a laundryman is the nucleus of his trauma. The father does not have muscles so he is obliged to do the job of a laundryman, taking into account the scant choice of cheap work given to Chinese immigrants.

He withdraws into a silent, yet psychologically turbulent world of his own. This reticence tells about the father's inability to complain and voice out the suffering as it is beyond the scope of language. It cannot be worded because it is not recognized by the father's cognition and that is why it keeps retuning in his dreams. Caruth argues that "trauma that has not been integrated into conscious knowledge returns, demanding recognition, repetition denotes psychic distress" (qtd. in Parker 6). This meets with Freud's idea of the return of the repressed. In the case of the father the trauma returns in nightmares and it returns because it is repressed in his psyche.

Again what happens to the father is that he is traumatized. This is revealed in his curses, nightly screams and silences. "Where does [his] problem begin?" It begins the moment he feels reduced to the status of an illiterate, the moment he and other Chinese immigrants are trodden over by women, possibly prostitutes in the Immigration Station, which anticipates their emasculation and denigration to a status lower than that of women taking into consideration patriarchy-staunching culture he belongs to. "Why is his life murky?" The answer is that the frustrating degradation from his status in China to the new humiliating and alienating status in America causes him to live a murky life which renders him a silent ghost. Kingston comments: "he'd been here since his teens, and he died regressing to a weird fantasy of China" (*The Fifth Book of Peace* 27). All his life he is silent and finally he cocoons himself in the fantasy of glorious bygone days, just



like Moon Orchid who withdraws from what she perceives as a hostile world to the safer world of the mental asylum.

### Conclusion

Giving due attention to trauma as being a psychological wound in the stories of Moon Orchid and BaBa narrated in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* testifies not only to the idea that the traumatized cannot speak, but also to the intrinsic relation between the notion of unwillful displacement and trauma genesis. The two ancestors are traumatized as a result of what can apparently be considered as willful spatial movement, whereas in reality it is a forced movement as a result of social or economic necessities. Both characters undergo traumatic experiences as a result of humiliating and debasing racial or patriarchal practices to which they are subjected in a foreign land, and withdraw from public life to buffer themselves in an alternative world of silence and secrecy. They also show physical as well as psychic symptoms or manifestations of trauma, chief among them are the inability to speak, recurrent nightmares, agoraphobia and silence. The absence of language as a symptom or a reaction to a traumatic event does not discard alternative ways of expressing trauma such as writing or drawing, when exploring other cases of traumatized subjects.

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