

Traumatized Identities in Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Colony"

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Abstract

This paper considers Franz Kafka's (1924-1883) short story; "In the Penal Colony" (1919) in the light of the theory of trauma based on Cathy Caruth's (1955-) critical views. Trauma can create a psychic wound on the victim's mind that forces him or her to respond psychologically. Based on some traumatic events that some individuals experience they get traumatized and their identities are affected by such traumatic effects. Thus they behave abnormally and out of control. "In the Penal Colony", the characters' identities are traumatized and are diagnosed in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder which are the symptoms of a traumatic experience. For instance, the condemned Man, the Traveller, and the soldier are caught in a system in which they suffer from the negative and distressing image of themselves. The Traveller is traumatized by watching the shattered body of the officer and this can traumatize his identity. In Kafka's story, all the characters are punished without any reason. In fact, they are trapped in a labyrinth in which there is no way out and they are condemned to death. The characters seem to struggle for survival to prevent death, but the more they try, the less they are successful. Kafka himself experiences all the traumas, including individual trauma, historical trauma, and cultural trauma. Similarly, in "The Penal Colony", the characters experience individual trauma that ruins their identities as much as possible. The island that is depicted in the story is like a labyrinth that the characters are traumatized individually. Therefore, Kafka can portray his traumas that he experiences by the World Wars in his short story, "In the Penal Colony".

Keywords: Trauma, Post-traumatic stress disorder, Labyrinth, Identity, Survival, Death, Psychic Wound.

1. Introduction

Franz Kafka (183-1924) is one of the greatest and most influential writers of the 20th century and one of the most important figures of modern European literature. His writings were an indictment of the crushing alienation and bureaucratic authority of modern society. The two books *Metamorphosis* and *Trial* are among his most important works. Kafka was born in a German-speaking Jewish family in Prague. At that time, Prague was the center of the Bohemian region. This region was one of the lands belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was the eldest child in the family, having two younger brothers and three sisters. Both brothers died before Franz was six, and his three sisters later died in Nazi death camps during World War II.

His father was a Jewish merchant and his mother was a fanatic woman. The autocratic and ambitious behavior of the father had created such a frightening environment in the family that Kafka's childhood vision was surrounded by a shadow full of fear, so that the image of this nightmare was never forgotten and removed throughout his life. Perhaps this hatred of living with a hard-hearted father caused the young Kafka to take refuge in religion.

Kafka learned German as his first language. But he also spoke Czech more or less flawlessly. He was also familiar with French language and culture. One of his favorite novelists was Gustave Flaubert. His Jewish education was limited to performing the Feast of Obligations at the age of thirteen and going to synagogue four times a year.

However, he was a successful businessman. His life and works were influenced by the Great War (World War I). The damage caused by the First World War included all his works and his personal and professional life. Many scholars have examined Kafka's life and writings and have concluded that the cultural environment in which Kafka lived and worked was influenced by the dire consequences of World War I.

"In the Penal Colony" (also translated as "In the Penal Settlement") is a short story by Franz Kafka written in German in October 1914, revised in November 1918, and first published in October 1919. As in some of Kafka's other writings, the narrator in this story seems detached from, or perhaps desensitized to, the events that would normally be recorded with horror. The Island features Octave Mirbeau's Garden of Torture as a work. The story takes place in an anonymous penal colony and describes the final use of an elaborate torture device that inscribes the sentence of a condemned prisoner on his skin slow as he slowly dies over the course of twelve hours. As the plot develops, the reader learns more and more about the machine, including its origins and rationale.

Kafka wrote "In the Penal Colony" in 1914, the year World War I (1918-1914) began, but the story was published in 1919, the year the war ended with peace treaties signed. A penal colony was an isolated place where governments sent prisoners and political dissidents to establish new settlements, often under very harsh and brutal conditions. In Kafka's time, one of the most traumatic penal colonies was Devil's Island, administered by the French from 1852 to 1953 in French Guiana, on the northeast coast of South America.

Prisoners were sent to work naked and most of them died from severe illnesses and diseases. In this short story, Kafka wants to show how much identities are damaged and search for their true identity which is damaged by some events, such as a punishment that has severe consequences for a prisoner. The brutality of the colonizing countries influenced Kafka's works, especially his short story "In the Penal Colony", so that he tried to capture it in his own narrative approach. When trauma occurs as a terrifying and overwhelming experience or situation, it attacks the person from the outside. Although the sources of trauma are broad, they quickly contain overwhelming emotions that result from the traumatic event, which can damage the body and psyche of the affected person. PTSD as a diagnosis has developed an organized framework for understanding clinical symptoms in terms of re-experiencing the traumatic event through distressing memories of flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations.

Therefore, individual trauma is caused by psychological or psychoanalytic symptoms mentioned based on traumatic experiences. The sense of self and identity can be damaged by any type of trauma such as violence, aggression, accidents, atrocities, cruelty and oppression. This paper aims to reveal the effects of trauma, by any type of injury, on the construction of people's identity.

2. Materials and Methods

The construction and formation of a person's identity, whether male or female, can be influenced by many issues. Trauma theory has its roots in psychiatry, psychology or psychoanalysis and then enters literary theory and literature respectively. Contemporary critics such as Cathy Carrot have developed Neo-Freudian and literary trauma (the New Approach), which can act as an umbrella and incorporate psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature. Trauma affects the foundations of one's self and identity and can be a kind of cultural deviation against cultural beliefs and values.

Cathy Caruth (1955-) has established herself among academics primarily by dealing with trauma studies, but also with literature, literary theory and psychoanalysis. Caruth defines trauma as follows: "[t]rauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned" [1]. According to such a view, trauma is not only an event that occurred sometime in the past, but also a traumatic experience that is not fully understood.

Caruth has been trying to show the fact or truth that trauma as an overwhelming phenomenon is "not a simple memory" [1]. Obviously, trauma is not understood as a simple memory, and he elaborates on the response to trauma. The trauma that occurred led to the symptoms and diagnosis known as post-traumatic stress disorder as officially

recognized by the *American Psychiatric Association* in 1980, "which included the symptoms of what had previously been shell-shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis, and referred to responses to both human and natural catastrophes" [1]. Experience, or neurosis caused by natural events such as floods, earthquakes or man-made disasters, such as car accidents or plane crashes, etc. Trauma refers to a shocking event that no ordinary mind can process and digest. And also through his inherent sense of latent, the victim in disturbing and devastating flashbacks, nightmares, disturbing hallucinations, scattered thoughts, mental chaos and obsession, repetitive and uncontrolled memories of this disgusting phenomenon in terms of after-death effects, accompanies Traumatic stress disorder.

In fact, trauma is defined as a physical wound, but it leaves a shocking and terrible mark on the mind, and regardless of the healing of the physical injury, the psychological wound is catastrophic. Cathy Caruth notes: "[i]f a life threat to the body and the survival of this threat are experienced as the direct infliction and the healing of a wound, trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely because it is not directly available to experience" [2]. In fact the traumatic event involves the psyche more than the body.

3. Main Discussion

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is a response or reaction to a sudden unexpected aggressive event or events that cannot be fully understood or comprehended, but are recognized by their repeated return through something like books, scenes, movies or films, dreams (nightmares) and so on. However, Caruth, in her book *Unclaimed Experience*, elaborates on the definition of trauma "[a]s the repeated infliction of a wound, the Greek *trauma*, or 'wound', originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body" [2]. According to Caruth, the root of the English word trauma is from the Greek word *trauma*, which means a wound that damages the physical body. But trauma is a wound based on Caruth's idea, but not an ordinary wound. In this light, she claims "[i]n its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, [...], the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" [2]. One's sense of self and identity and his or her self-identity is fundamentally fragmented owing to a sort of traumatic event. In this sense, Nigel Hunt, the trauma theorist and thinker, claims that "[a] traumatic event, by definition, breaks down the accepted social and personal structures and belief systems of the individual" [3]. It is understood that a shocking occurrence, according to Hunt, can collapse and damage belief systems which compose and construct the individual's identity. Consequently, when belief systems and attitudes that interfere in social or in personal structures are shattered, identity and self-concept of individuals undoubtedly will be traumatized. Therefore, "[t]his can make life very difficult for the traumatized person, and any treatment must try and rebuild their belief system" [3]. Regarding such an idea, damaging belief systems lead to being traumatized and that can result in living live a severely painful life, so that there is a 'must' for re-building and re-establishing those fragmentary belief systems in terms of being traumatized. Putting stress on this opinion is possible by referring to Constantine Sedikides and others who believe that: "[h]umans strive to protect, retain, repair, or increase the positivity of the self-concept-in short, they are driven by the motive to self-enhance" [4]. That is to say, humans try to make a sense of themselves by increasing or enhancing a sense of self-identity or self-concept. Clearly, the individuals endeavor to establish themselves in a context of value and belief systems by which their identities are constructed.

Individual trauma affects the psyche and impairs one's ability to defend against shattering and traumatizing factors, so that the traumatized subject cannot trace a sense of a return easily to the previous self or identity. Therefore, the traumatized individual mourns for the old self and develops a new one by defining the traumatized identity through the lens of the holistic events that create individual trauma for his or her identity. No wonder, individual trauma is a destructive factor which makes an initial deterioration in the traumatized person's self and identity. As Peter J. Burke and Jane E. Stets note in *Identity Theory*, "[t]he self originates in the mind of persons and is that which characterizes an individual's consciousness of his or her own being or identity" [5]. Clearly, when a traumatic event occurs the traumatized recognition of him or her relating to self and identity is taken place, and it imposes, in turn, a burden and hardship on psychological health. As in the story of In the "Penal Colony" of Kafka it can be understood that all individuals are traumatized one by one, that is, all of them have afflicted with individual traumas.

In the novel, when the officer talks to the Traveler and explains the way by which the apparatus works, he frequently refers to the old Commandant who invented the machine:

"This apparatus", he said, grasping a connecting rod and leaning against it, "I our previous commandant's invention. I also worked with him on the very first tests and took part in all the work right up to its completion. However, the credit for the invention belongs to him alone. Have you heard of our previous commandant? No? Well, I'm not claiming too much when I say that the organization of the entire penal colony is his work. We, his friends, already new at the time of his death that the administration of the colony was so self-contained that even if his successor has a thousand new plans in mind, he would not be able to alter anything of the old plan, at least not for several years. And our predication has held. The new commandant has had to recognize that. It's a shame that you didn't know the previous commandant?". [6]

By these sentences it can be understood that the old commandant or the previous one is respected by the officer. The new commandant should bear it in his mind that he owes the previous one for this favor. In fact, through old or previous commandant, Kafka depicts trauma of war and imperialism which led up to "the history of trauma, can only take place through the listening of another" [1].

Caruth comes to believe that a trauma can repeat through describing it to a listener. Similarly, Kafka "In the Penal Colony" tends to investigate the traumatized identities through delineating their traumas and repeating their traumas at different times on various occasions in the hope that the readers might be listeners. Clearly, a trauma that occurs is not necessarily physical but it might be psychological as Caruth believes that a trauma traumatizes mind not the body. Kath Woodward, the identity theorist and critic, says: "[i]dentity gives us a sense of who we are and to some extent satisfies a demand for some degree of stability and security" [7]. Based on Woodward's view, people can gain understanding and definition of themselves by their identities and accordingly this sense of stability and security can be achieved through identity. Therefore, by a sort of trauma or crisis, the subject can confront instability and insecurity. Woodward goes further and says, "[i]dentity can be fluid, and changing over time. Uncertainty about identity may lead people to lay claim to essential truths in their search for security and stability" [7]. She demonstrates that identity is not stable and can change during the time and that uncertainty concerning identity might come to end by looking for truths about the security and stability of identity. Thus, reconstruction of unstable and insecure identity is related to having recognition and a warning of the truths and the past of the traumatized subject. In the novel, the machine breaks down and the officer is killed by its needles, the Traveller becomes sad:

[The Traveller, by contrast, was very upset. Obviously the machine was breaking up. Its quite operation had been an illusion. He felt as if he had to look after the officer, now that the latter could no longer look after himself. But while the falling gear wheels were claiming all his attention, he had neglected to look at the rest of the machine. However, when he now bent over the Harrow, once the last gear wheel had left the Inscriber, he had a new, even more unpleasant surprise. The Harrow was not writing but only stabbing, and the Bed was not rolling the body, but lifting it, quivering, up into the needles. The Traveller wanted to reach into stop the whole thing, if possible. This was not the torture the officer wished to attain. It was murder, pure and simple. He stretched out his hands. But at that point the Harrow was already moving up wards and to the side, with the skewered body-just as it did in other cases, but only in the twelfth hour. Blood flowed out in hundreds of streams, not mixed with water-the water tubes had also failed to work this time. Then one last thing went wrong: the body would not come loose to work the needles. Its blood streamed out, but it hung over the pit without falling. The Harrow wanted to move back to its original position, but, as if realizing that it could not free itself of its load, it remained over the hole. [6]

This shows that the Traveller is traumatized and can not do any thing for the officer. The prisoner is not murdered by the machine; rather, the officer is killed brutally and violently. The machines breaks down and the officer is killed. As a matter of fact, the Traveller can feel a psychic disorder presented in his identity as he himself shouts when the officer's blood streamed out: "Help, the Traveller yelled out to the solider and the Condemned Man and grabbed the officer's feet. He wanted to push against the feet himself and have the two others grab the officer's head from the other side, so he could be slowly taken off the needles" [6].

In fact, the Traveller is witness to a violent death. The officer's death can create a sort of post-traumatic stress disorder not only for the Traveller that is witness to a violent death. Caruth describes post-traumatic stress-disorder in this way:

[t]his [psychic disorder] has culminated in this study in this study of *post-traumatic stress disorder*, or PTSD, which describes an over whelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon. [2].

The effects of a traumatic experience or event can return in the repetitious forms of agonizing and uncontrolled representation of that phenomenon. These states are the same as post-traumatic stress-disorder occurrence or disastrous event. Concerning the Traveller's traumatized identity his post-traumatic stress-disorder is the "repetitive appearance of his feeling of being alone" (ibid). At the end of the story, the Traveller leaves the island by boat and does not allow the solider and the condemned Man board on the boat. It indicates that he wants to be alone because he has been traumatized due to his feelings, emotions, and identity:

In the teahouse the Solider and the condemned Man had come across some people they knew who detained them. However, they must have broken free of them soon, because by the time the Traveller found himself in the middle of a long staircase which lead to the boats, they were already running after him. They probably wanted to force the Traveller at the last minute to take them with him. While the Traveller was haggling at the bottom of the

stairs with a sailor about his passage out to the streamer, the two men were racing down the steps in silence, for they did not dare cry out. But as they reached the bottom, the Traveller was already in the boat, and the sailor at once cast off from shore. They could still have jumped into the boat, but the Traveller picked up a heavy knotted rope from the boat bottom, threatened them with it, and thus prevented them from Jumping in. [6]

He wants to escape from being on that island because he thinks loneliness is the best item that he can be aloof from this post-traumatic stress disorder. The soldier and the condemned Man are traumatized too, but they are condemned to stay on the island. They suffer from the strategy of the punishment of the authorities of the island, but they don't have any right to oppose against them. The pent-up emotions lead to the traumatization. The Traveller feels psychologically alone and he is tired of this feeling, he, "preserves negative self-knowledge entirely in sensible terms" [2]. Based on Caruth's view, the Traveller has a negative understanding of himself and his identity reasonably, or he has a negative image of himself truly. He is aware of his traumatized identity. In addition, he "was to collapse incommensurable levels of happenings and thought" [8]. Repeating and recalling so often his trauma of being alone, the Traveller tends to shatter his incomprehensible traumatic scattered intrusive thoughts. Here Caruth's opinion can be supportive: "[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" [1]. Caruth proposes that to be traumatized is exactly because of experiencing a traumatic event.

The Traveller is traumatized by observing the shattered body of the officer and also by the docile prisoner who does not have any objection to his verdict. Therefore, his identity is traumatized due to these events. In this regard, Nigel Hunt claims that "[t]he relationship between self and identity is central to our understanding of the response to trauma, and links with the social constructions that help to build notions of self-identity" [3].

Regarding such an idea, the relationship between self and identity is understood due to the kind of responses to trauma and is determined through the interaction with social systems in which the concepts of establishing self-conception and self-identity are influential in constructing identity, on the whole. Therefore, responses to trauma which are indicative of changes that occur in the individual's self and identity and reveal that those notions and concepts used for forming identity acting in an abnormal way. When the officer explained to the Traveller the way machine works, the officer could not cope with the brutal way of the machine that imprints some writings or words on the bodies of the condemned ones who are sometimes innocent:

Because of its silent working, the machine did not really attract attention. [...] for the traveler it was embarrassing. He was determined to remain here until the end, but he could no longer endure the sight of the two men. "Go home", he said. The Soldier might have been ready to do that, but the Condemned Man took the order as a direct punishment. With his hands folded he begged and pleaded to be allowed to stay there. And when the Traveller shook his head and was unwilling to give in, he even knelt down. Seeing that orders were of no help here, the Traveller wanted to go over and chase the two away. [6]

The Traveller is embarrassed by the machine and the sort of punishment. As Caruth says, "[t]he pathology in consists, in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced it" [1]. Caruth suggests that the traumatized pathology fails to understand or realize the event at the moment of its occurrence and he or she comes to experience it 'belatedly' or by the nature of latency of trauma. Thus "trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the remarking of collective memory" [9]. According to what Eyerman says, trauma in its cultural form is associated with the change occurred in collective identity and effects strongly collective memory. The Traveller experiences it belatedly by another traumatic event and consequently, he as a trauma survivor exposes the traumatized identity. In fact, the Traveller tends to increase his self-recognition by challenging identity notion. Therefore, he chooses to reach his self-identity and self-realization. He is caught in a labyrinth that can not go out of it easily, but by reaching the self-identity or self-realization regarding his traumas, he can get out of it. A labyrinth is considered a number of communication passages arranged in a bewildering complexity through which it can be difficult or impossible to find a way out without direction and guidance. In fact, a labyrinth is a maze-like arrangement that can be conditions of things, events, ideas, ideologies, theories, etc. that are complex and confusing: [t]he Labyrinth is constructed of dualities, rewards, and punishments, *good and evil, predetermination and freedom, oneness and polarization, unity and the dissipation of unity*" [10]. In fact, according to the above definition, the labyrinth is a kind of system which is maintained by "opposing forces held in equilibrium" [10].

Therefore, the Traveller, the soldier, and the condemned Man are in a kind of mental labyrinth that imposes traumatic effects on their minds. They try to be free from this trauma, but by escaping from the island it is the Traveller who can set him free from this mental labyrinth and him wants to reconstruct his traumatized identity. As Caruth says, "[t]rauma is not simply and effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" [1]. As she suggests, trauma is a mysterious concept serves to be notion of survival instead of destruction. She goes further and completes the above claim that, "[t] is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" [1]. Caruth emphasizes that traumatized people recognize their traumatic experience as a

paradox between destruction and survival, and this leads to the incomprehensible nature of that tragedy. Accordingly, the Traveller tends to survive when he wants to escape from the island. He wants to get out of this labyrinth in which he is traumatized and his identity is traumatized too. Therefore, he intends to return to his self-identity without traumatization. He takes refuge in his self-identity in order to reconstruct his traumatized identity. Kafka himself has been trapped in the labyrinth of trauma and it can be said that he experienced the historical trauma. It is evident that he is afflicted with the historical trauma. Historical trauma refers to a specific event such as war, racial and ethnic aggression and violence which can undertake a transformation into a generalized and symbolized instance of human suffering. In twentieth century two significant World Wars occurred and their disastrous effects were "beyond one's own personal experiences" [3]. Hunt believes that historical traumas are not compared to individual experiences, or individuals who lived through those particular events were not able to match their own personal experiences with experienced disasters emerged from those two important and traumatic wars. As a matter of fact, World War I (1914-1918) was really the official beginning of trauma studies through which soldiers and civilians who too often suffered both physically and psychologically experienced traumatically violent events and situations. There are some sorts of historical traumas like World War I (1914-1918), World War II (1939-1945), Holocaust (Jewish persecution in 1933-1945), Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 1945).

The definition of the current conception of trauma in the western culture is largely related to the definition of the post-traumatic stress disorder delineated as symptoms and characteristics listed in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder* (DSM-IV-TR). Individual's reactions to trauma based on post-traumatic stress disorder are "[d]istressing recollections, nightmares, hallucinations, flashbacks, overwhelming fears and anxieties" [11].

A wide range of psychological disorders, experienced after a happened traumatic event, is represented in the form of a distressful recollection of the traumatic phenomenon, nightmares and hallucinations, or in the form of intense fear and anxiety. What is more, the feelings of alienation, guilty, shame, hopelessness, nihilism, and abnormal behavior are associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

By historical trauma one is traumatized by shock, terror, and strong anxiety. The best example of the historical trauma can be the trauma of being colonized. In this case, Based on what was mentioned, trauma theory has a view to things that people share with each other like a massacre of inhabitants.

4. Conclusion

In many of Kafka's works one can find the trace of imposing pain, terrors, and scenes that are trauma-related. In "In the Penal Colony" all the characters' identities are traumatized and they lose the sense of meaning and are obsessed with abnormal and strange ways in order to attach themselves to others in the society and appear as normal as possible. Kafka shows his characters' post-traumatic stress disorders as traumatic responses to their traumas. Utilizing critical views in the novel, the researcher strives to demonstrate what affect traumatically the construction of the character's identities and make their identities traumatized. For example, the character's identity is traumatized due to being witness to the officer's brutal death and also to the machine as a killer of many innocent people. Therefore, he feels traumatized and wants to escapes from his dramatization by leaving the island on a boat. Similarly, he wants to escape from the traumatic labyrinths of his mind that he can not get out of them easily. The traumatized identities are paralyzed mentally because they can not decide well at the appropriate or proper moments. Therefore, Kafka represents the traumatized identities of his characters very well.

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