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Remembrance through Melancholic (Re) presentations in Shobasakthi's Traitor

Aishwarya Mohan

M. A. University of Madras, Chennai, India

Abstract

This paper elaborates on the narratological manifestations of trauma in Shobasakthi's Traitor and the complexity of the articulated melancholia in the context of the Sri Lankan civil war and culture. While events like Holocaust dominates the field of trauma studies, this paper focus on the negligible space that postcolonial trauma holds and examines various insidious traumas faced by the marginalized in the postcolonial world. Shobasakthi's Traitor opens the psychological undercurrent of an individual inflicted with trauma. The dual identity of Nesakumaran, the protagonist and narrator, demarcates the performance of the conscious and the unconscious: a victim in the former and a victimizer in the latter. Alongside differentiating between Freud's ideology of melancholia and mourning, this paper investigates the artistic manifestation of melancholia rather than viewing it as a disease. The article's main propositions are three-fold: 1) positioning postcolonial trauma in the cultural and social context against the Eurocentric approach to trauma studies, 2) arguing melancholia as an act of remembering as opposed to mourning and elaborating on the process of remembrance by the narrator in Traitor and 3) equating

melancholia as a complex emotion, the narratological functions in articulating trauma and exploring the dynamic role of the narrator as a victim, witness and victimizer. Furthermore, on discussing Traitor as a testimonial narrative, the article reflects literature as one of the preferred tools in expressing the unintelligible suffering and pain.

Keywords: Articulating trauma, Complex emotion, Insidious traumas, Melancholia, Postcolonial trauma

Introduction

The official tensions of civil war in Sri Lanka, though, escalated in 1983, its roots trace back to the colonial period. Under the British rule, there were little tensions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, but both the groups unitedly formed the Ceylon National Congress in 1919 against the British and to bring administrative reforms. Constant denial of equal representation in the Legislative Council created a minority consciousness among the Tamil politicians. In the

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beginning, the political parties insisted the replacement of English as the official language by both Tamil and Sinhala languages, but subsequently after independence, the Ceylon Citizenship Act (1948) and the Sinhala Only Act (1956) deliberately discriminated the Tamils culturally, linguistically and socio-economically. Enactment of these two acts along with the Policy of Standardization in the 1970s resulted in many Tamils resigning their government jobs and reduced opportunities for higher education in Sri Lanka. 'Of the 22,374 teachers..., 18,000 were Sinhalese, 2,507 were Muslims and only 1,807 were Tamils. During those four years, 3,500 Tamil teachers retired and hence there was no net addition but actual decline in the number of Tamil teachers. In the police and defence services, Tamil recruitment after 1970 was virtually nil' (Ponnambalam, 1983, p.175). Against this political discrimination, many Tamil militant groups were formed, of which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) remained prominent in countering the Sri Lankan army.

In the arena of trauma studies as Step Craps (2013) has pointed out in his *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, the neglect to include diverse voices other than the Eurocentric Holocaust is its significant limitation even now. Focusing on the representation of traumatic

voices of Nesakumaran and Shobasakthi, placed against the background of postcolonial Sri Lankan civil war, shifts from treating Holocaust as the touchstone of trauma studies and thereby accounts for non-Western experiences of trauma. One significant assumption that Stef Craps disillusions is that trauma ensues from a single catastrophic event. In *Traitor*, Shobasakthi explores the Sri Lankan civil war alongside issues of caste and religion. The novel brings in the social, cultural and political matrix of trauma to understand the framework of the posttraumatic condition. *Traitor* develops on a feminist psychotherapist Maria Root's (1992) idea of 'insidious trauma'. Insidious trauma is the experience faced by individuals or a community subjugated under any forms of oppression such as race, gender, caste, etc., almost daily in their lifetime. This cumulative oppression has a considerable effect on the person who undergoes it. Apart from the conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, Shobasakthi's *Traitor* highlights these insidious traumas faced by the marginalized in Sri Lanka.

While unitedly claiming Tamil Eelam, a separate state, ironically the Tamils were divided over caste and religion, which existed even during the colonial times. Unlike the Sinhalese, the Tamils did not see the British rule, Christianity or the implementation of English language as a cultural

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threat(Ponnambalam, 1983, p. 42), especially the people of Vellalar caste, a dominant peasant caste in Sri Lanka. They maintained this social hierarchy as they owned majority of the agricultural lands (Nithyanandam, 2002) and through spatial endogamy (Sivakumar, 1989). Their flexible way of accepting the British rule and their education system enabled members of this caste occupy several elite positions in the government and politics as well, unlike the other low caste people and the Sinhalese. After independence the Sinhalese-based government marked the radical shift of marginalising the Tamils including the Vellalar caste. Consequently, higher education and elite governmental jobs became an illusion. As Sivakumar (1989) describes this as, ‘the genesis of the Eelam movement lay in a radical shift in the balance of power from the Sri Lankan Tamils to the Sinhalese’ (p. 135).In the militant groups, too, the Vellalar caste took leadership, and meanwhile other caste people emerged valiantly demanding the abolition of caste hierarchy.

In the essay “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud (1917/1964) suggest that one of the distinguishing factors that separates melancholia from mourning is the complexity and ambivalence that surrounds the loss. The causes of melancholia are myriad. ‘The ambivalence is...constitutional’ (Freud, 1917/1964, p.

256) as caste, which is structured socially and culturally, in the Sri Lankan traumatic experience that makes the existing inexplicable melancholia incomprehensible and complex. Furthermore, as Sivakumar (1989) says, ‘it is within this larger political framework that we must consider other important factors such as ethnicity, economic deprivation and “colonialization” of Tamil areas’ (p. 135).

Melancholia and Remembering

While the early historicity of Melancholia treated it as an illness and abnormality, the theory of Melancholia from the twentieth century has been diffused and modified within a wide array of disciplines including literature, philosophy, psychology, etc.While melancholia and mourning, according to Freud (1917/1964)are the reactions to the loss of the loved ones, they are different as mourning takes place in the conscious mind and melancholia in the unconscious space of the mind. It is this unconscious space that Shobasakthi tries to articulate in *Traitor*, and Mudiganti (2020) describes, ‘Shobasakthi makes it the fulcrum of the narrative in *Traitor* to raise pertinent questions on the distortions of the human psyche when it is radically altered by the experience of war’ (p. 114). Nevertheless, Nirami’s victimization reflects Nesakumaran’s trauma in the unconscious space. When *Traitor* begins, Nesakumaran’s refugee life in France with

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his wife Premini and daughter Nirami is further shattered when Nirami is found pregnant. Nesakumaran was then imprisoned for paedophilia, and in the end, he says he did not understand his actions both when he was kidnapped by a gang of Tamils after being ousted by Premini and her brother. He acknowledges that he is mentally ill and does not deserve punishment. The degree to which Nesakumaran's past life in Sri Lanka has affected his unconscious and actions seem incomprehensible to himself and the readers as well.

According to Freud (1917/1964), though, both mourning and melancholia 'involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life' (p. 243), mourning, with time, could be reverted to establish the lost connection with reality; whereas in melancholia, a pathological condition, the chances of such turning back to reality are less. The main characteristic of melancholia is the 'disturbance of self-regard', unlike in mourning. 'The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment' (Freud, 1917/1964, p. 244). While Nesakumaran's inflicted trauma in the unconscious has

caused humiliation to his self-regard, however, he neither ceased to love his wife and daughter nor inhibited his actions and relationship with the outer world. Contrarily, it was the outer world that barred its door against him. While in prison, he records his past life in which he tries to reflect on his actions of betrayal, and in Sri Lanka he managed to survive through becoming a traitor to everybody those who believed in him. He narrates his own traumatic life, but it entangles with it the tale of many other traumatized souls. The narrative, till the end, does not exhibit sense of guilt or expects punishment. The story of Traitor fits more into a guilt-free and reflective narrative rather than a confessional fiction. Furthermore, on pointing out to Nesakumaran describing his paedophilia can only be under a legal framework, Mudiganti(2020) says, 'This seeming insistence on the person being a paedophile only in legal terms opens the text up for explorations on the ways in which the sexual violence committed by him may not have seemed an act of violence to him' (p. 117)

While mourning is characterized as accepting and forgetting the dead, melancholia tries to remember and reflect upon the past when not in contact with the outside world. The reflective nature of melancholia and the complexity of postcolonial melancholia, which includes caste, race, language, religion and gender,

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are pivotally exploited in *Traitor*. Melancholia expresses something inexplicable and incomprehensible, unlike in mourning. Individuals with melancholia experience degradation of his self 'emptying the ego until it is completely impoverished' (Freud 1917/1964, p. 253), and they do not realise that a change has occurred within them. The ego is regarded as worthless, incapable, and morally despicable; it tends to vilify itself to be punished and outcasted. 'In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself' (Freud, 1917/1964, p. 246). In impregnating his daughter, Nesakumaran's ego trespassed all the social norms and customs leading to his degradation of his ego. In the prison, Nesakumaran tries to map his past actions, the trauma he underwent to answer his degraded demeanor towards his daughter. In remembering his past actions, the novel takes a fragmentary narrative to represent his unsettled relationship between the past and the present; the conscious and the unconscious. Quite paradoxically, Nesakumaran's fragmentary narrative holds within it many shattered narratives; in articulating melancholia, the shattered ego accommodates many such shattered stories forming a fragmented identity. While Nesakumaran's ego has underwent a change, unbeknownst to himself, and became morally despicable, his self does not show guilt. Rather, through pensive

articulation of trauma in his unconscious, he tries to rejuvenate his ego to establish a truce with reality.

Furthermore, the process in which Nesakumaran remembers his past is a mere recollection and reflection, and the narrative does not overwhelmingly demonstrate emotion. The inflicted trauma of the past, while reflected in the present, transforms one's self apathetic, which is evident in Nesakumaran's narrative. Though narrated in the first person, Nesakumaran's narrative alienates himself while he reflects on his past. The alienation effect of Bertolt Brecht distances the audience from getting emotionally involved in the play, but in *Traitor*, Nesakumaran, the narrator and protagonist, distances himself from his narrative; a technique that opens the text for exploring traumatic articulation. Brecht's alienation effect emphasizes on the artificiality of the theatrical performance; whereas in Shobasakthi's *Traitor*, it creates a novel narrative experience in the articulation of trauma. Not only inclusive of many narratives, the text also gives glimpses of various other issues like caste, religion and colonial influence as insidious traumas that resulted in the degradation of Nesakumaran's ego. Nesakumaran, though, personally not a victim of caste or religion in *Traitor*, he has been a witness to such discriminations. He witnessed his family's scornful attitude towards people of the other caste. For instance, his family's

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inhumane behaviour towards Rajendran, a servant, and his father's accusations on Srikanthamalar, the 'Kadayar bitch' (p. 51), for Nesakumaran's fate. Ernest, Nesakumaran's father, even aggravated a group of men to burn Srikanthamalar's house, reflects the social and spatial marginalisation.

Articulating Melancholia

Shobasakthi, a victim of war and child soldier in the LTTE, and his works address the functionality of human psyche, its traumatization and migrant experiences that the Sri Lankan civil war has necessitated. While Nesakumaran's behaviour, as both the victim of the civil war and the victimizer of violence on his Nirami, show traits of his self being withdrawn from consciousness. Nesakumaran could recollect the loss of people around him from the past while he could not understand what he has lost in him. The role that Nesakumaran possesses in the novel is quite dynamic as he has been the victimizer, victim and witness. Not only the trauma inflicted on him when he was a victim affected his unconscious, but also the various insidious traumas that he has been a witness of, greatly altered his psyche beyond understandability. The book presents diverse entangled narratives and witnesses. The trauma that Nesakumaran faced blends into Shobasakthi's autobiography. Nesakumaran's narrative is the mouthpiece of Shobasakthi's

autobiographical testimony, on a metaphorical level.

Both Shobasakthi's and Nesakumaran's identity juxtaposes one another by the method they used to articulate their trauma. As Judith Herman (1992) in *Trauma and Recovery* says, testimonial account of trauma's birth is marked by 'the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud' (p. 1). Language and literature serve as one of the common modes of articulating and deconstructing trauma, expressing the inexplicable. According to Geoffrey Hartman (1995), 'in literature, as much as in life, the simplest event can resonate mysteriously, be invested with aura, and tend toward the symbolic. The symbolic, in this sense, is not a denial of literal or referential but its uncanny intensification [...] we get a clearer view of the relation of literature to mental functioning in several key areas, including reference, subjectivity, and narration' (p. 547). As the narrative unfurls, Shobasakthi under the guise of Nesakumaran experiences the cathartic effect, nevertheless, not only purging emotions like pity and fear as investigates by Aristotle, but also the bitter experiences of his past.

With addition to viewing melancholia as a disease and mental abnormality, it could also be considered as

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an emotion. Melancholia with its reflective and imaginative articulation becomes more like any other emotion, especially in the context of trauma studies. Melancholia is a complex emotion that houses waves of many other emotions, a peculiar characteristic that make it difficult to articulate and separates melancholia from other emotions such as fear, pity, anger and love.

In *Traitor*, though, first person narrative is dominant, there are few instances in which the author uses third person narrative. The third person narrative used in *Traitor* culminates the alienation effect more fittingly. While describing his father's humiliation by the Sinhalese policemen and his sister's, Maria's, rape by the navy soldiers, the narrative shifts from the first person to the third person. This shift also marks his position from a victim to a witness. The narrative records these events like a distanced observer would, and the narrative shows no emotion, even though humiliation and sexual assault were directed against Nesakumaran's father and sister. The gap between the narrator and his narrative widens as the story unravels. In the beginning, Nesakumaran endeavours end up in a tussle with inspector Jayakumar. Jayakumar's men made Nesakumaran strip off his shirt and pant and taken to Urathurai police station. It is there he elaborates on his wounds and pain as a result of the policemen's physical

assault, and as the narrative builds this description of his emotional and physical pain diminishes. And as he becomes the victim and witness of the violence on himself and on people around him, the narrative becomes non-descriptive and an indifferent attitude to violence builds within Nesakumaran.

Conclusion

In remembering the historically unforgettable and politically important incidents, for instance, the Welikada Prison Massacre, Shobasakthi's *Traitor* also presents a cross-section of the Sri Lankan society, politics and inhumane actions committed by both the Tamils and the Sinhalese. At one stage in the novel, he even declares, 'there is no difference between the liberation fighters and the government army. The Sinhala people have never been our enemy! All our struggles and sacrifices against the racist government are being defeated by the actions of some tricksters' (p. 147). The novel sets the stage for discussing various insidious traumas that gets accumulated in the unconscious. As the translated title, *Traitor*, of the novel suggests Nesakumaran betrayed everybody around him, and not the least, he betrayed his daughter and ultimately himself. As Mudiganti says, 'Through his act of violence, Nesakumaran betrays not only his daughter but also himself, for he fails to break out of the cycle of violence and

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initiates his daughter into the life of a victim of violence' (p. 128). Finally, this paper focused on the acts and process of remembering through melancholia and the method through which traumatic manifestation gets represented in Shobasakthi's *Traitor*. Finally, the article discussed melancholia as a complex emotion and its narratological articulation of it in Shobasakthi's *Traitor*.

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