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Elements of Trauma in the Poems of Claude McKay

Abstract: The Harlem Renaissance was a literary movement that gave birth to several proficient works of writers who expressed their complete emotions through their works when the Whites in America dominated them. Claude McKay served as a seminal figure in that movement. His poems gave birth to numerous emotions that were hidden inside every Black and which were tormenting them since many years. There are various emotions felt under the umbrella term 'trauma'. This research article tries to bring out the elements of trauma found in select poems of Claude McKay that the Blacks would have undergone when they were under the Whites.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay, Poems, Elements of trauma

I. INTRODUCTION

The Harlem Renaissance, being primarily a literary and intellectual movement, has its origin dating back to the 1920s that also marks the war and race riots of 1919. Claude McKay was an American Jamaican writer and poet who was one of the seminal figures in the Harlem Renaissance. He still lives through his novels, essays and poems, including "If We Must Die" and "Harlem Shadows." Trauma is always the major problem faced by people when there is war or riot in the place of livelihood. On the analysis of select poems of Claude McKay, the theme of trauma is found to be echoing predominantly. The different types of trauma and the characteristics of it are discussed here with reference to Claude McKay's poems.

II. INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMA

The term "trauma" refers to experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions. It can refer to "a single event, multiple events, or a set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically and emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual wellbeing" (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 2). There are different types of trauma like Natural or

Human-Caused Traumas, Individual, Group, Community, and Mass Traumas, Historical trauma, and Political Terror and War Trauma (SAMHSA, 2014)

The elements of trauma are feeling alone and vulnerable, having disturbing thoughts or flashbacks of trauma, anger, sadness, helplessness, strong identification with the victims, avoidant behaviours, feeling as though it will never get better, and withdrawals. (SAMHSA 2014).

III. THE TRAUMATIC ELEMENTS IN CLAUDE MCKAY'S POEMS

Not all the poems of McKay express trauma, but those that express are intense in their own way. The use of vocabularies, symbols, similes, metaphors and images in the poems convey the intensity of trauma that the Black Americans had undergone. In the poem *Winter in the Country*, though winter is always beautiful in New York, that “beauty (is) hidden from the eyes” of the blacks. It is only the “hideousness and scars of the years” left for the Blacks there. Here, the persona experiences the *Human-caused Trauma* and feels as though it will never get better. This leads to severe *depression* where there is no pleasure in life and one would tend to think oneself *worthless* and would end up in self-blame.

*Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
And find in it the superhuman power
To hold me to the letter of your law!
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate
Against the potent poison of your hate.*

(Classic Poetry series, p85)

In the above poem “White Houses”, on one side the strength of the persona to bear the torture done to him can be seen, but on the other side, with respect to trauma, *anger* and the *avoidant behaviour* can be seen. ‘Wrathful’ conveys his *anger* and to keep his ‘heart inviolate’ conveys his *avoidant behaviour*. The persona seems to be uncaring of whatever happens to him and lets himself follow his own way.

Feelings of *fragility* and *vulnerability* can be seen in the poem “Tormented” when the persona talks to “peace” by personifying it- “I will not reason, wrestle here with you, / Though you pursue and worry me about.” There is no more want of anything as the persona

has already lost all the hope left. In fact, the persona gets angry at “peace” and expresses his anger by saying “Peace! cease tormenting me to have your wish”.

In the poem “The Lynching”, although the Black men were executed cruelly, “The women thronged to look, but never a one/ Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue”. This on one side may express the courageousness of women, but on the other side, it denotes *war trauma* where women have become numb to these ‘lynching’ happening now and then and the traumatic element of *helplessness* can be seen here.

The poem “The Harlem Dancer” has depicted the traumatic element of strong identification with the victim. For survival, the Black women chose to do prostitution, which is not their interest. It was merely a compulsion. The persona was able to feel what the “Harlem dancer” feels and therefore with confidence says “I knew her self was not in that strange place”. This traumatic situation where a woman removes her ‘self’ from her to survive becomes the *Individual Trauma* (SAMHSA, 2014).

The persona in the poem “The Castaways”, expresses the element of *helplessness* when he sees women “desolate and mean”. He could not help them and therefore “Moaning (he) turned away, for misery/ I have (he has) the strength to bear but not to see”. This expresses that he could not see his people suffer which leads to the *community trauma*. If he feels any love for anybody there is always a barrier of race where he could not express his love.

Too green the springing April grass,
Too blue the silver-speckled sky,
For me to linger here, alas,
While happy winds go laughing by,
Wasting the golden hours indoors,
Washing windows and scrubbing floors.

(Classic Poetry series, p55)

Even if the nature is pleasant and easing, the Blacks could not associate it with them as they are tormented indoors which could be seen in the poem “Spring in New Hampshire”. They are employed for mean jobs and are never allowed to feel the pleasure of nature. This leads them to experience trauma. Even the ‘moon’ does not soothe them. In fact, the persona in the poem “Song of the Moon” in hatred says there was no magic in the moon’s presence

there. The height of the disturbed mind can be seen in the words uttered by the persona to the moon –“Go spill your beauty on the laughing faces”. This shows that the Blacks are not happy at all.

Even the love between the couples is not intimate. In the poem “Romance”, there is no true romance among the Black couples. They know it is not the true lovemaking, but they do it just to pass the night. Happiness for them is when they “Rest in Peace”.

No more for you the city's thorny ways,
The ugly corners of the Negro belt;
The miseries and pains of these harsh days
By you will never, never again be felt.

(Classic Poetry series, p51)

The persona feels it is only through death that the Blacks win their life as after death nobody is going to control them. Their joy in death portrays the height of trauma that they experience when they live. Paradoxically the poet says, the dawn breaks and the dark is over when somebody is dead. To him death is the safe ‘retreat’ where nobody could reach.

Poetry is where a human could express his/her feelings in a subtle manner. Here, in the poem “Poetry”, the poet tries hard to hide his ‘tortured soul’ from the ‘poem’ for the fear that he would pour out his volley of emotions immediately like a child. He feels something in him is lost forever (Classic Poetry series, p48). He now has to lead a life that a ghost leads, under the White man’s threat. This is *hopelessness*, which is also an element of trauma. This hopelessness tortures the persona throughout his life.

The traumatic element *loneliness* can be seen in the poem “On Broadway”, where the persona describes the world around him that is very busy. Though everybody is busy and though the Broadway is wonderful, only the *loneliness* stays with him. He says “My heart, my heart is lonely”. In a traumatic condition, though everybody is with the victim, it is the *loneliness* that creeps into him very strongly. (Classic Poetry series, p45)

Even homelessness leads to trauma. The refugees are those who are homeless. The Blacks in America were treated as refugees even though they lived there for many centuries. Claude McKay expresses this deeply in the poem “Enslaved”. The persona in the poem

desperately needs a home for his 'race'. They can get that only when they are liberated from the Whites' 'yoke', which symbolizes the Whites' custody or domination.

IV. CONCLUSION

Claude McKay being the seminal writer and poet of Harlem Renaissance has been the inspiration to many other writers. His poems were used in many contexts to substantiate the sufferings of Black Americans, which even helped to get their civil rights. The feelings like courage and determination are felt in his poem "America", where he says although America 'feeds' him the 'bread of bitterness' it gives him the 'strength to stand erect against' its 'hate'. Therefore, as Tagore would say "where there is a will there is a way", the Black Americans, through the Harlem Renaissance have contributed a great amount of works and energy to the foundation and development of American Literature.

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