

stories are treatments of love and life giving principles. The bureaucrat cannot believe that Prof. Shankar was once an ascetic and now an admirer of the river Narmada. Gita Mehta sketches that the river is a perennial source of life, so it has become immortal. Parasuram Ramamoorthi writes, "A River Sutra is an attempt to subversiveness to present the river as an eternal source of the flow of life." (Parasuram Ramamoorthi:153)

The progress of the six stories can be seen as variations on the theme of love and the secret of the human heart. Commenting about the uniqueness of the stories of the unsettled nature of man, swinging between happiness and despair, Asit Chandmal points out, "There are stories of obsession and renunciation, desperation, and destruction, desire and death. Above all there are stories of sexual, sensual and spiritual longings and love." (Asit Chandmal: 30)

The Indian myths portray a river as a feminine being and the Narmada River is also not exempted from it. Dr. Mitra discusses the myth of the Narmada to the narrator, he tells that, when Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance the perspiration from his body flowed down the hills. The stream took the form of a woman and become dangerous to the ascetics tempting them by appearing as a dancer at one moment and as a romantic dreamer and as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire. These attracted Shiva and he named her Narmada, the Delightful One, blessing her with the words,

"You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible, then he gave her in marriage to the ocean Lord of Rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors." (Gita Mehta: 8)

Thus everyone looks at the river as a woman and the narrator too after a long period of stay in the banks of river start imagining the river as a woman,

"I watched the water slowly redden, catching reflections from the rose colors of dawn, and imagined the river as a woman painting her palms and the sides of her feet with vermilion as she prepared to meet her lover". (Gita Mehta:139)

Later the discussion between Dr. Mitra and the narrator leads to the point whether the river is a whore or not Dr. Mitra points out, "So Narmada is unlike to mean whore." (Gita Mehta:151) The narrator denies saying that the river Narmada is not a whore. These kinds of representations such as, river as woman/goddess/whore are possible in Indian writings.

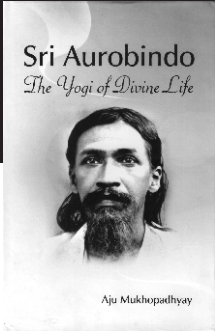
In the novel the river Narmada is portrayed as river full of life and hope. It gives shelter to many living things other than human beings also. The river tried to give a sort of experience to the narrator of the novel and others those who dwell in the bank of it and remained as a guide of giving knowledge and experience to them. The Indian River Narmada is seen with the spiritual bliss, "In the living stones of the Narmada, God is to be found". (Gita Mehta:174)

In the novel the narrator is observing the experiences of different kinds of people living on the banks of the Narmada River. It gives different experiences and so the narrator gets intellectual bliss through the real stories and also the spiritual nature of the Narmada River is realized by the narrator through other characters he meets. At the end of the novel the narrator is moving away from the banks of Narmada but the lessons given by it are pleasant memories to him. In *A River Sutra* for the narrator the river is not only symbol of experience but also as the guide to the characters in the stories and to himself. The narrator stays at one place, but the people come and go from him and give him experiences; therefore the river stands for experience-giver/guide of knowledge in this novel.

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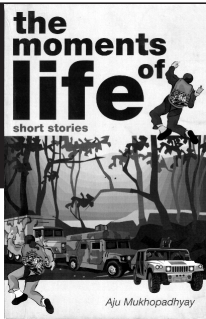
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# Radioactivity of Trauma in Jewish Immigrants in America

- Raj Sree M.S.

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to explain the concept of radioactivity of trauma with respect to Jewish immigrants who came to America during and after the Second World War from the perspective of trauma studies. Trauma theory is a discourse of the unrepresentable, a discourse of the event or object that destabilizes language, consciousness and perceptions. Radioactivity of trauma takes place when an external reality of enormous proportions like holocaust enters the psychic spaces without the individual having any control over its entry, implantation and effects. Focusing on select Jewish American fiction, I would like to elucidate this concept.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, dissociation, fragmentation, revictimization, objectification and dehumanization

*No order. No chronology, no logic, no lodging. Nothing but a desire for writing and this proliferation of existence. To fix this porousness of the probable, this micro-memory of strangeness. To spread out all the signs of difference: bubbles of memories, pieces of vague reminiscences coming all together without texture, a bit grey. Without order, they were loose series, colours without contours, lights without brightness, lines without objects. Fleeting. The black night of exile. History in pieces. (The Wanderer 5)*

The opening lines from Regine Robin's *The Wanderer* summarizes and introduces the concept of radioactivity of trauma which is related to those who experience severe political, religious, ethnic, and social persecution. American Jewish fiction set in the post-Holocaust era depicts the life of Jews trapped in the Diaspora, cut off from the Yiddish culture that has been destroyed, people irretrievably damaged, alive but not whole after the Holocaust. Unlike the immigrants of pre-Holocaust period, the post Holocaust immigrants do not seek assimilation and acculturation, but continue to grapple with the European past and often labor to preserve their Jewish identity, history, and tradition. Jewish immigrant writing transforms the holocaust experience into a story of Jewish resistance and survival.

The concept of radioactivity of trauma is put forward by Yolanda Gampel, a psychologist who herself is a holocaust survivor. It describes how traumatic experiences continue to do emotional damage to generations. Like radioactivity the violence faced enters and contaminate the psychic spaces and the non-representable remnants of trauma are

passed on to the next generation. In science, as we all know radioactive radiations not only cause immediate diseases to those who are exposed to the radiations but also to the successive generations as the radiations emitted alters the genes present in DNA. And as a result the successive generations are also affected. Likewise trauma and its legacies like dissociation, fragmentation and other post traumatic stress disorders are passed to the next generation. Unlike the consequences of radioactive radiations which are passed genetically to the successive generation, trauma is inherited by the second generation immigrants unconsciously by culturally mediated norms and via psychological interaction. And thus similar to the survivor generation they inherit symptoms of post traumatic disorders. Unlike the parents, they bear the 'the scar without the wound'. Trauma is usually transmitted through non-verbal, ambiguous silence. Though the silence was meant to be protective, it led to a fearful reflection of the horrors that were inflicted upon the parents as the children filled it in with their distorted imaginations. Intergenerational transmission of trauma occurs when the traumatized parent implants their own emotional instability onto their children. As the children internalize the parents' stress and social mistrust, they remain confused about the boundaries between themselves and their parents. A sense of impending danger seeps into their unconscious as the compulsive anxiety of their parents tends to be transmitted to their children, raising their own anxiety.

Psychological literature of Jewish immigrants on trauma reveals that it is passed down intergenerationally often unaware to the survivors' descendents. This kind of literature not only emphasizes the discontinuities with the parental generation but also the process by which the subsequent generations construct understandings of the past. Feelings of shame, helplessness and loss of self worth borne of traumatic events are passed on by each generation in the belief that the next generation will undo the past humiliations and succeed. The feelings of loss and displacement which are legacies of a painful, horrid past are transmitted intergenerationally motivating them to undertake memory work. They are forced to mourn and reverse the humiliation and feelings of helplessness that their parents experienced.

Radioactivity of trauma can be defined as a 'dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric affecting a group of people who have achieved some degree of cohesion'. The aftermath of trauma include a sense of captivity, psychological fragmentation, the loss of a sense of safety, trust, and self-worth, and a feeling of revictimization, and, most importantly, the loss of a coherent self which are referred to in the afore mentioned quotation. For the victims of holocaust who reached America and who are scattered across the globe, it is impossible to assimilate the traumatic past into a present which would enable them to construct a coherent narrative of the self. The belated experience of trauma exists as fragments of memories as testimony to the traumatic event:

... seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences 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. (Felman and Laub,5)

Trauma involves a rupturing of an individual's sense of internal and external worlds which leaves post-traumatic legacies such as dissociation, depression and hypersensitivity. According to Habermas the experience of massive trauma disrupts the normal process of memory, altering 'the conditions for continuity' of personal as well as 'historical life-connections' (252).

The survivor generation and the successive generation possess symptoms of post traumatic disorders which includes nightmares, difficulty in containing anger, restricted emotional range, fear of death, depression and guilt over surviving the violence while many other perished. Cathy Caruth, an exponent in trauma studies, defines trauma as 'a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events'. Events such as experiencing or witnessing killing, rape, or torture can turn out to be traumatic. And the post traumatic life of the victims is characterized by a numbing of responses, intense anxiety, dissociation, fragmentation, depression and hypersensitivity. These symptoms in the Jewish immigrants in America depend on the extent of the trauma and the psychological, social and material resources available. These people left their homeland due to severe persecution under Hitler's regime. In Jewish immigrants, this kind of post traumatic stress disorders resulting in radioactivity of trauma is caused by the inhuman experiences during the Holocaust, culture shock arising out of the immigrant experience, a sense of exile and displacement.

The immigrants that I refer to must not be confused with the neo diaspora which consist of those people who search for better pastures beyond the borders. By immigrants I refer to those people who fled from their home land due to persecution, famine or natural catastrophe or those who are forced to leave their homeland by some hidden political, religious or racial agendas. Like those who escaped the well organized genocides in Rwanda, ethnic cleansing and rape in Bosnia, systematic devastation in Kosovo, the immigrants from former Yugoslavia, Haiti, Central America and Indo China experienced trauma prior to the event of actual border crossing. Unlike the neo diaspora, these people immigrate for their survival.

As they experienced traumatic events before their arrival, the aftermath is experienced while settling in the new country. Here, their behavior and perception about life and surroundings are characterized and controlled by post traumatic stress disorders. To quote Said "exile is the un-healable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (439) and this turns out to be traumatic to the Jewish

immigrants. The very existence of victim diasporas carries the burden of trauma.

Besides the violence experienced prior to immigration, the actual border crossing is often a traumatic event. The process of resettling in the 'New Land' involves a lot of incidents which can be traumatic later on in their life. They are stripped of their previous social relationships and their roles which provide them with a sense of identity and belonging, without which, they feel marginalized. This kind of disorientation is passed on to the children who themselves find it difficult to adjust in the 'New Land' as immigration results in falling out of meaning into the weightlessness of chaos. While some immigrants are culturally bound to Jewish tradition despite their diasporan location, some like Bellow's Sammler represents assimilated Jew who is subjected to torture because of being Jewish by birth and who later choose Jewish association as part of their holocaust witness.

Jewish American writers like Wallant, Malamud and Bellow concentrates on the political, social and psychological ramifications of the Holocaust. They explore the Nazi objectification and dehumanization of Jews. They depict the disorientation and entrapment nightmare, which assaults the senses with an immediacy and brutality of holocaust experience which is traumatic. The Jewish immigrants in America often used western forms to highlight the connections between Holocaust brutality and the civilization where the brutality took shape and sustained. While Ozick and Cohen introduced the Hebrew midrashic legend, Singer and Potok brought in lamentation liturgy, Biblical allusions, Hasidic implications of restoration, and covenant theology to place the Holocaust in historic context of Jewish martyrdom. They share the elegiac, lamentative tone, drawing upon traditional Hebraic responses to national catastrophe, invoking the collective Jewish memory.

Writers often resort to dream device to convey "the displacement, confusion, indirection and incoherence of the victim during Nazi period and to serve as a barometer measuring the failure of the victim to repress the past" (Kremer 16). In Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* Nazerman's nightmarish memories are juxtaposed with American ghetto scenes to suggest the sadistic attitude of Germans toward their Jewish victims. Wallant's protagonist dreams of the surgery he suffered without anesthetics, remembers witnessing the rape of his wife, and his friends electrocution, recalls being forced to move corpses of friends and relatives from gas chambers to crematorium. The dreams constitute his memories of victimization in the Holocaust. Once a professor at the University of Kraków, Nazerman is now a suburbanite who runs a pawnshop in East Harlem, and he is haunted by images of the losses and tortures of his concentration camp past and the drowning of his son in excrement.

All his dreams recount horrific scenes of helplessness. Psychologically speaking, helplessness is a post traumatic stress disorder. It is as a result

of a life threatening experience in which the victim has been helpless. It is quite distinct from moral weakness. His post Holocaust behavior very clearly explains the concept radioactivity of trauma. When a person is powerless, any form of resistance is futile and the victim sinks into a state of surrender. Traumatic reactions occur when resistance, escape or any action of defense is futile. And the human system of self defense becomes overwhelmed and disorganized. Such a mental state is portrayed by Wallant in *The Pawnbroker*. The climax of the story occurs on the anniversary of Nazerman's family's death and forces him to confront his own emotions, including his guilt over having survived and his desire to die. Wallant transformed documented accounts of Holocaust atrocities into personal memories.

The victim protagonists suffer identity and religious crises, inability to love and trust others; death and disorientation of the creative impulse. They have a fragmented and disconnected autobiographical narrative, disturbed body image, low self-esteem, excessive shame, and negative internal working models of self. Nazerman deals with his trauma by deliberately shutting down his emotions, as a result he sees everyone around him with indifference. Trauma leaves the victim devoid of intentional clarity. Intentional clarity is a state of self awareness in which one is clear about the reference points and when one is sure about one's feelings, thoughts, physiological reactions and behaviours are about. Humiliating experiences during holocaust tampered the intentional clarity in Jewish immigrants like Nazerman. Herman in *Enemies: A Love Story* lived under the threat of death for so long that no relationship is meaningful to him. He is incapable of making decision for himself. He lacks intentional clarity. Though he keeps three women, his consciousness oscillates between guilt and love. His servant Yadmiga who saved him is ever present in his mind as a reminder of his past.

They are trapped by their holocaust experiences. Some continue to manifest wartime behaviour, such as searching for places of concealment, and others dream of revenge. The survivor protagonists manifest alienation and suffer unbidden memories, nightmares, and psychological disquiet. The traumatic memory is omnipresent in the mind of the traumatized. And hence the memory repeatedly occurs as a flashback, which can occur at any time, and the victim is unable to distinguish the memory from actually experiencing the event again. The traumatized individuals appear to be indifferent in order to mask the feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. Nazerman behaves with everyone around in a very detached, indifferent manner. Immigrant survivor protagonists are likely to stress the homelessness of the immigrant and also of his separation from American-Jews who have not faced near death experiences. They deal with postwar survival trauma.

Lytard compares holocaust 'to an earthquake which can destroy all the instruments that might have been capable of measuring it'. It disrupted not only the past beliefs but also the victims' perception about their