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Fragmented Voices: Analysing Trauma and Neglect in Kimberly Brubaker Bradley's *The War That Saved My Life*

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Abstract:

Trauma narratives effectively mirror the uncertainties and disruptions in the consciousness of an individual, often emphasising the unspeakable nature of trauma through fragmented narration. *The War that Saved My Life* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley depicts the struggle of Ada, a disabled girl and her brother, who are displaced during World War II. This study examines the representation of trauma in children, particularly disabled children, to understand its implications on the well-being of a person. The study analyses how societal attitudes toward disability can exacerbate an individual's suffering. The article probes into the effects of trauma and maternal neglect on attachment styles and interpersonal relationships by utilising attachment and trauma theory.

Keywords: Trauma, Attachment, Disability, Neglect, Children.

Introduction

Trauma is broadly defined as an emotional reaction to an event or a series of events that are disturbing and distressing in nature that significantly impact an individual's physical, emotional and psychological well-being. It is a subjective experience that can vary from person to person. Experiencing a traumatic event such as abuse, neglect, violence, war, accidents, or natural calamities can affect an individual's capacity to control emotions and develop interpersonal relations.

The concept of trauma emerged in the field of psychology during the nineteenth century through the pioneering works of Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet. Within the humanities, trauma studies tend to incline more to the psychoanalytic ways of thinking rather than strictly following the clinical approaches (Berger 564). Trauma studies examine the psychological, cultural and social dimensions of trauma and are concerned less with the effects of trauma on

individuals. Analysing the impact of a traumatic experience on individual psyches can be used to examine the personal experience of a collective traumatic event in a text. This approach helps to build a connection between the personal and political worlds or individual and cultural groups (Mambrol).

Though trauma is an essential field of discussion, the trauma experienced by younger children is not given much attention. In "Trauma in Childhood: A Neglected Population," Young et al. argue that young children are particularly susceptible to the adverse outcomes of trauma because of their limited coping skills, dependence on their primary caregiver for protection, and childhood is a period of rapid emotional, mental, physical, neurological, behavioural and cognitive development. They argue that untreated trauma can have a notable impact on the developmental trajectories of a child (247).

Kimberly Brubaker Bradley's *The War That Saved My Life* (2015), a recipient of Dorothy Canfield Fisher Children's Book Award, narrates the story of Ada, a ten-year-old disabled girl and her six-year-old brother, Jamie, set against the backdrop of World War II in London. Ada is subjected to constant abuse by her mother due to her club foot and is confined to their dilapidated flat. As the war with Germany looms, Ada and Jamie escape to the English countryside during the evacuation of local London kids. They are reluctantly taken in by Susan Smith, who was battling herself with depression following the death of her best friend. The relationship between Ada, Jamie and Susan is initially fraught with difficulties, but gradually, it evolves into a close bond. The narrative further explores Ada's struggle to emerge as a person with confidence, compassion, resilience and self-respect.

This paper aims to close read the novel *The War That Saved My Life* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley to explore the representation of trauma experienced by children, especially disabled children, to understand its implications on the psychological well-being of a person. This article will examine the portrayal of maternal neglect and trauma to understand its effect on attachment styles and interpersonal relations through the lens of trauma and attachment theory.

Representation of Trauma in *The War That Saved My Life*

In *Beyond Pleasure Principle*, Freud explains the concept of trauma as "the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (qtd in Caruth 4). Unlike the physical wounds that can be healed, trauma disrupts an individual's ability to perceive reality. Cathy Caruth further elucidates this by describing trauma as "a shock that

appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is, in fact, a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 61). This results in physical and emotional suffering and an inability to comprehend the meaning of the event. Literary representations of trauma help us to understand the diverse ways in which people respond to traumatic events. Hartman suggests that the trauma theory "focuses on the relationship of words and trauma and helps us to read the wound with the aid of literature" (537). This theoretical framework allows for a deeper exploration of how trauma affects an individual through trauma narratives.

The narrative employs autodiegetic narration to delve into Ada's personal and psychological struggle. Ada, a young girl with clubfoot, describes her right foot as small and twisted, with an inflexible ankle and toes in the air that hurt whenever she tries to put weight on it. She crawls around in the flat, taking care of her brother and making tea for her abusive mother. Her physical disability becomes the root cause of the emotional abuse and physical violence that she endures. Research indicates that children with disabilities are more likely to experience maltreatment than children without disabilities, as they experience violence because of social stigma and discrimination (Thomas-Skaf and Jenney 320). The stigma associated with people with a disability as deviant from the accepted 'normal' body devoid of any differences as essentially evil is resonated through the words of her mother, who describes Ada as "A monster, with that ugly foot! You think I want the world seeing my shame?" (Bradley 4). Her mother considers Ada to be a disgrace. She uses every opportunity to belittle her daughter by calling her a cripple, which leads to the erasure of all her capabilities and capacities. Ada is confined to her one-room flat to conceal her disability from the world. Society's obsession over abled bodies is further depicted when her mother says to Ada about her brother, "He ain't a cripple. Not like you" (Bradley 1). This remark not only reflects her mother's prejudices but also the cultural biases and the social belief that deviant bodies are to be isolated, controlled and confined.

In addition to the verbal and emotional abuse, Ada's mother tries to discipline Ada through physical abuse and extreme methods of torture, such as hitting and locking her up in the cabinet, a small cubby, dark, damp and smelly place with roaches under the sink for the whole night. This continuous torture causes extreme emotional distress, fear and dissociation from reality. During one of such bad experiences, Ada notes, "I wouldn't be able to see anything or even feel anything. I would be just gone," highlighting the trauma she undergoes (Bradley 13). Freud identifies such trauma as a rift in the experience of the mind. In their tiny

flat in London, Ada is forced to live like a captivated animal, knowing nothing about the world outside.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychological condition that arises in response to experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. It is characterised by a set of symptoms that can significantly impact the mental health and daily functioning of an individual. These symptoms often include reexperiencing the trauma, avoidance or emotional numbing, and hyperarousal (Young et al. 232). These symptoms can manifest differently in children compared to adults, but they are fundamentally similar in their core characteristics.

Reexperiencing trauma is reliving the trauma through flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, or nightmares. This often entails the rigid, repetitive, and anxious responses that result in the repeated enactment of trauma. When exposed to traumatic reminders, they react with overwhelming emotional and physical reactions (Young et al. 232). In the novel, Ada reexperiences trauma immediately after she escapes from London. Memories of maternal abuse and neglect persistently haunt her, weakening her sense of security in her new environment. When Ada inadvertently damages Susan's sewing machine, she succumbs to numbness and tremors, reliving the trauma. She hides under the bed and confines herself in a dark space that resembles the cabinet. Her reaction can be seen as a self-imposed punishment, further affirmed when Jamie says their mother locks Ada in a cabinet whenever she does anything wrong. She utters meaningless, repetitive phrases like "So I can stay. So I can stay so I can stay so I can stay" and "Oh no. Ohnoohnoohnoohno" reveal her unbearable distress (Bradley 173). Ada's inability to articulate her fears and thoughts highlights the psychological impact of trauma and its manifestations as intrusive and fearful thoughts. It indicates trauma's enigmatic presence in consciousness, challenging conventional modes of memory assimilation and narrative expression. Her experience acts as a poignant illustration of trauma's disruptive influence over language and consciousness.

Avoidance or Numbing involves efforts to escape the reminders of the trauma through emotional numbness or detachment from others. Children might avoid places, people, specific conversations, or activities that trigger traumatic memories (Young et al. 233). Ada demonstrates avoidance behaviour by withdrawing from situations reminiscent of her past suffering. An illustrative incident occurs during an air raid when Ada, Susan and Jamie had to seek refuge in an Anderson shelter. Despite the imminent danger, Ada finds herself paralysed by her traumatic past. The dampness, odour and darkness inside the shelter evoke memories of

her painful confinement in her mother's cabinet. She was aware of the impending threat to her life, but she could not get inside it as it reminded her of the dark, smelling, painful space, the cabinet in her Mam's house. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't go inside. Not into that damp shelter, that smelled exactly like the cabinet. Not into that darkness. Not into that pain" (Bradley 267). Ada's sensory experience reminds her of the painful memories that act as trauma triggers: "The smell enveloped me. I could feel the cramped cabinet, the roaches. I could hear Mam laughing while I screamed" (Bradley 267). This event serves as a stark reminder of the pervasive influence of trauma on daily life.

Hyperarousal manifests as irritability, difficulty sleeping, extreme fussiness, hypervigilance and temper tantrums, indicative of their heightened sensitivity to stress and perceived threats (Young et al. 233). This heightened state of agitation often stems from an inability to regulate emotions, leading to disproportionate responses to minor frustrations or disruptions. Ada's reaction to receiving a gift from Susan illustrates this phenomenon vividly. Instead of expressing joy or gratitude, Ada becomes highly agitated and startled when Susan gifts her a green velvet dress and compliments her appearance. Ada's internal dialogue reveals a torment of disorganised thoughts:

She was lying. She was lying and I couldn't bear it. I heard Mam's voice shrieking in my head. "You ugly piece of rubbish! Filth and trash! No one wants you, with that ugly foot!" My head started to shake. Rubbish. Filth. Trash. (Bradley 213)

This overwhelming emotional turmoil results in a physical attack, where Ada kicks, bites and scratches Susan, which later she could not recollect. Dori Laub explains in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*:

The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after ... Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. (Laub 69)

This concept of trauma lacking temporal parameters resonates with Ada's experience. Just as trauma survivors struggle with the absence of a distinct beginning or end to their traumatic events, Ada's trauma permeates her consciousness, blurring the boundaries between

past and present. The chronic nature of Ada's trauma, caused by multiple abusive incidents with her mother, perpetuates a distressing emotional cycle, fuelling hyperarousal responses. While the novel unfolds in chronological order, Ada's subjective experience of time is marked by fragmentation and distortion, mirroring the disruptive effects of trauma on cognitive processes, where past and present moments intermingle, creating a fragmented temporal reality.

Ada's inability to fully express her emotions and her clinginess to Jamie as the sole source of solace further points out the impact of trauma on interpersonal relations and emotional regulation. Her fear of returning to the traumatic environment manifests in violent outbursts. She reacts furiously to the perceived threat of sending back to London. Subsequent episodes include Ada throwing and breaking a plate of food, and she tries to force-feed Jamie the food that has fallen on the ground, though he resists, gags, and chokes. The thought of Susan sending them back to London because of Jamie's unpleasant behaviour makes her exasperated, resulting in a frenzied action. Following this event, she wakes from her sleep disoriented and gasping, without being able to comprehend and recollect what happened. Ada's dissociation from reality is evident through her inability to recognise her own emotions and thoughts. The portrayal of Ada's struggles illustrates the enduring effects of trauma on children's emotional and cognitive development. By exploring Ada's experience, readers gain a deeper understanding of the ongoing challenges trauma survivors confront even after the immediate danger has passed.

Impact of Trauma and Neglect on Attachment Styles

Originally theorised by John Bowlby, attachment theory integrates insights from evolutionary theory, ethology, and cybernetics. Attachment is a child's innate tendency to seek and derive comfort from interaction with reliable caregivers, especially during times of anxiety and vulnerability. According to Bowlby, an infant's internalised perceptions of itself and other people (referred to as "internal working models") are shaped by both the availability and responsiveness of the caretaker (qtd in Finzi et al. 771). Ainsworth identified differences in the attachment behaviour of individuals, which led to the identification of four consistent patterns of attachment forms: secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and disorganised.

A securely attached child typically exhibits confidence in their caregiver's availability and responsiveness, which fosters a sense of safety, encourages exploration of their environment and seeks comfort from their caregiver in times of distress. In contrast, children

with an anxious-ambivalent attachment style often exhibit clinginess, heightened dependency, and difficulty exploring their environment. They are uncertain about their caregiver's responsiveness, leading to anxiety and hyper-vigilance. Avoidant attachment is characterised by emotional insulation from the caregiver in their absence and presence. It is caused frequently by maternal unresponsiveness, hostility and rejection. Disorganised attachment often stems from the inconsistent or frightening behaviour of the caregiver, resulting in a lack of coherent strategy for dealing with stress and alternate displays of inhibition and distress (Finzi et al.772). When a primary caregiver, particularly the mother, fails to provide consistent, nurturing, and responsive care, it can cause various attachment issues.

Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment that has fatal effects on a child's development. It tends to be chronic and insidious, not immediately manifesting an adverse impact on the child (Proctor and Dubowitz 27). It is known as the "neglect of the neglect" that can pose a significant threat to the child's overall growth and well-being (Hildyard and Wolfe 680). Neglect typically begins in early childhood and contributes to the construction of a negative perception of self and others. Children are more vulnerable to trauma due to the lack of presence and protection of a primary caregiver.

In Ada's case, her mother neglects her in all possible realms of life. Working at a pub during the night and sleeping during the day, Ada's mother leaves Ada responsible for her brother. The dynamic between Ada and her mother is that of a master and a servant. Her mother's commands starkly illustrate this dynamic:

"Cut me some bread and dripping," Mam said. "Get some for your brother too." She laughed. "And, if there's anything left, you can throw it out of the window. See if Stephen White would like your dinner. How'd you like that?" (Bradley 2)

Mam's words reveal her cold, distant demeanour and how she uses Ada merely as an object to ease her life. Rather than providing comfort to her disabled child by taking care of her physical and emotional needs, she falsely tells everyone around that Ada needs to be locked up for being mentally ill. Ada is deprived of education and medical support to relieve her daily pain. She is kept in squalid conditions and denied essential information such as her full name, birthdate, father's name, address, and medical condition. Ada's mother is indifferent to her children's well-being, focusing only on financial gains and benefits. She forcefully brings them back from the countryside during bomb threats, motivated by the cost of upkeep rather than their safety. Her obsession with money is evident in her refusal to seek medical care for Ada

as an infant, exacerbating Ada's disability. She further tries to accuse Ada and reduces her identity to her disability by stating, "You're a cripple. That's all you are. A cripple, and nothing but a cripple" (Bradley 297). She vehemently opposes sending Ada to the countryside, asserting, "Who'd want you? Nobody, that's who. Nice people don't want to look at foot" (Bradley 15). This constant abuse and devaluation cause Ada to form a negative self-perception, increasing her vulnerability to trauma.

Trauma can disrupt the formation of secure attachments in children. Children are prone to develop negative representations of their parents when they endure frightful experiences with them. They start to perceive their parents as frightening and furious figures rather than sources of security and comfort, creating a mental landscape of persistent emotional suffering and unfavourable emotions. Consequently, children become hypervigilant, constantly waiting for their caregiver's response. Such situations, along with trauma, bring together the characteristics of avoidant and ambiguous stress, resulting in the formation of a disorganised attachment style or fearful-avoidant style (Erozkan 1072).

In Ada's case, the trauma inflicted by her mother and the absence of a nurturing primary caregiver to seek a secure base during difficult situations contribute to the development of a disorganised attachment style. Despite lacking positive memories with her mother, Ada does not completely reject her. In the novel, she yearns for her mother's approval and attributes her mother's disdain to her disability. She hopes that by concealing or rectifying her disability, she might gain her mother's acceptance: "If I could walk, maybe Mam wouldn't be so ashamed of me. Maybe we could disguise my crippled foot" (Bradley 10). In the novel, Ada frequently acknowledges her mother's rejection and dislike, yet she oscillates between seeking comfort and distancing herself from her mother. This ambivalence is evidently through her thoughts:

I hated— I hated—Oh. Even in my head I still couldn't say I hated Mam. Even now. If I could get my foot fixed, maybe she'd be different. May'be she'd love me. Maybe she would. (Bradley 204)

This inconsistency in Ada highlights her unpredictable nature, as she vacillates between desiring closeness and withdrawal from her mother. Although Ada never explicitly articulates fear for her mother, she considers, "Home was more frightening than bombs" (Bradley 63). The fear of being alone, hungry, neglected and abused leads her to consider death preferable to suffering in London. When Ada encounters her mother at Susan's house, she reexperiences

disorientation and distress, feeling cold and distant from everything around her. This reaction highlights the deep-seated trauma and confusion that define her relationship with her mother.

Ada's complicated relationship with her mother significantly impacts her interactions with others. She becomes suspicious of anyone who shows her affection and care. When Susan takes the role of caregiver, Ada expects her to behave as her mother did, anticipating punishment and confinement for wrongdoing. Contrary to her expectations, Susan proves to be genuinely caring, which confuses and unsettles Ada. She reflects, "I wanted Mam to be like Susan. I didn't trust Susan not to be like Mam" (Bradley 184). Ada perceives Susan as a potential reflection of her mother, assuming that Susan is forced to take care of them against her will. Susan challenges Ada's mental image of a primary giver as a self-indulgent, abusive and humiliating person, further confuses her. Ada longs for the same comfort that Susan provides in her mother, yet constantly feels that Susan is temporary, believing that her foot and her mother's disdain are permanent life. She feels furious about the temporariness of Susan's existence in her life and uneasy with physical proximity and touch simultaneously.

The intrusive reminders of her mother and the trauma that she endured make it difficult for Ada to connect with other people. She insulates herself, struggling to understand the social dynamics and make friends. Her inability to make connections stems from her negative self-perception. She avoids drawing attention to her foot and fears judgment, feeling unworthy of love, care, and support. Happiness, a foreign feeling to her, prompts vigilance and caution about the potential aftermath of being happy. She reflects, "All this about being together and being happy and celebrating—it felt threatening. Like I shouldn't be a part of it. Like I was not allowed" (Bradley 206). Traumatic events have the capacity to shatter attachments with friends, family, and community, disrupting one's self-image and eroding the belief systems that give meaning to the human experience (Herman 51). Ada's trauma had numbed her, impairing her ability to receive and reciprocate affection. She is afraid of expressing her genuine emotions, confusion and gratitude. These events show trauma's lasting impact on forming healthy relationships with others.

Conclusion

The novel *The War That Saved My Life* is a powerful depiction of trauma. The novel illustrates the pervasive effects of trauma on disabled children and its impact on their emotional and psychological development. The novel portrays that disabled children are more vulnerable to trauma when their primary caregivers abuse them physically, emotionally and verbally.

Neglect by a primary caregiver, particularly a mother, can significantly disrupt a child's attachment styles and interpersonal relations. Bradley vividly portrays the fear, insecurity, isolation and fragmented thoughts that arise in such circumstances, underscoring the critical role of nurturing caregivers in fostering a child's healthy development and relationships. Through Ada's experiences, the novel underscores the lasting consequences of trauma and the essential need for supportive, consistent care to mitigate the damaging effects of trauma.

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