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Exploring the Role of OPT: Trauma Narratives and Community Building in Times of War and Crisis

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Abstract

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Keywords: Kali Tal, other People's Trauma, Collective Trauma, Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), Narrative Therapy, Testimony

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Title

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Abstract

Delving into Tal's theory of other people's trauma (OPT), this qualitative study investigates the importance of fostering community and sharing traumatic experience among war survivors with respect to Born Under a Million Shadows (2009) by Andria Busfield. The major focus of the study is the exploration of the way the trauma narratives engage in the process of collective healing, resilience and post-traumatic growth (PTG) and retrieval. The research is concerned with explaining the role of OPT in community building and narrativization of trauma, ultimately asserting the impact of OPT on individual and collective healing and recovery. By doing this, the research will enrich the existing knowledge on psychology, social work, academia and conflict resolution, emphasizing the significance of integrating OPT into community development initiatives and trauma care services.

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Introduction

War claims devastating effects on individuals' physical and mental well-being. The mental health threats in the form of trauma and PTSD are have been the most pronounced among other ailments (WHO, 2022 & 2003). The scars of such physical and mental wounds can retain across generations, compelling the victims grapple to rebuild their lives and reestablish their relationships with their communities and create a sense of belonging (Hirschberger, 2018). To cope with these issues, storytelling and narrativization of trauma have emerged as powerful strategies providing healing and community development (Tal, 1996).

Narratives of trauma enable the survivors work through their experience, find solidarity and reunite with their identity and revive back to life. Busfield's Born under a Million Shadows has received a wide acclaim being a powerful text on war, trauma and recovery. The novel is a reflection of dynamics of trauma and eventual recovery in the form of community building. This paper explores the text's exploitation of trauma narrative to necessitate the importance of community building and shared experience through the inclusion of other people's trauma in order to pave the way for collective healing and post-traumatic growth.



The concept of OPT, as propounded by Tal, advocates that the individuals must connect and bear witness to the trauma of other people who undergo similar traumatic experiences, which will enable them to understand and empathize with them, ultimately helping them recover and rebuild their lives. The research hypothesizes that the level of empathy and understanding of trauma is higher among the individuals who have undergone similar traumatic experiences. Furthermore, the study also hypothesizes that texts employing OPT are more influential in advancing individual and collective healing than the ones that don't. The study aims at contributing to the advancement of comprehension about the nuances of trauma and community building, advocating the potential of OPT in promoting healing and PTG in the aftermath of war and conflicts. The study also sheds light on how narrative building and bearing testimony can work as catalysts in to bring recovery and community building.

Research Questions

1. How does the novel employ trauma narrative to establish a sense of community and shared experience amongst the victims of war trauma?
2. To what extent does the use of OPT creates a sense of solidarity and support among the various literary persona?

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the role of OPT in community building and PTG.
2. To pave the way for the establishment of policies for that can incorporate OPT as a means to achieve goals like trauma recovery, community building and social support.

Significance of the Study

The study's significance lies in its contribution to the advancement of comprehension about trauma narratives, PTG and community building. The research's main aim is the investigation of the role of OPT in shaping individual and collective identity and recovery, thereby enhancing our understanding of the concept. The study plays an important role by

promoting empathy among the war survivors. It will lead to the form strategies that can integrate trauma narratives, OPT, PTG and community building, augmenting our comprehension of the dynamics of trauma and PTSD.

Review of Literature

Narratives of trauma, bearing testimony to other people's trauma, have a prominent place in literature and psychology being an influential way of healing, recovery and community building as a repercussion of war (Herman, 1992; Tal, 1996). Tal's concept of OPT stands as a means by which they connect with other people's traumatic experiences and juxtapose these experiences with those which befall them, hence processing their own trauma and finding meaning (Tal, 1996). Story telling helps the survivors process their experience and seek support and solidarity, eventually being able to revive back to life (Brison, 2002). Ever since Tal's work, the idea has become the focal point especially with relation to its impact on community building and PTG. However, there still room for understanding how trauma narratives employ OPT, and how it works for post traumatic healing, recovery and growth. The research fills this gap by examining the role of OPT in trauma fiction. This part of the study tracks back the existing research identifying limitations and gaps in the previous studies.

Though the previous studies have somehow concerned themselves with the power of collective healing and recovery in the face of war and trauma (Brison, 2002; and, Tal, 1996), the major focus of these studies have been the individual survivors of war, while the possibilities of collective healing and growth, have largely been ignored. Moreover, the therapeutic function of narrativization of trauma has been given enough attention (OOrlog, 2016), but the body of work on the study of trauma, especially OPT, in literary representations, is not sufficient.

Still, there are a few studies that discuss the role of trauma narratives in promoting PTG and community building. For instance, (Bulik & Michalska, 2022) show that vicarious post traumatic growth (VPTG)

could be actualized through cognitive processing of trauma. The research also demonstrates that interface of VPTG, cognitive processing of trauma and empathy in female professionals navigating violent traumatic experiences, are more likely to recover in shorter time as compared to the ones who don't have such facility. A research by (DeRose, 2013) critically analyzes *Words of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* by Tal which emphasizes the necessity of "bearing witness" to and challenging "the status quo". DeRose claims that Tal asserts the importance of "contemporary literary and cultural studies *not* for literature *about* trauma survival, but for the literature *of* the trauma survivor". OPT as a theoretical ground has enriched literary interpretations ranging across multiple standpoints of the theory such as community psychology theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and trauma theory (Herman, 1992). These perspectives have helped to shed light on the complex relationships between OPT, trauma narratives, and community building.

Despite the growing body of research on OPT, there are several gaps and limitations in the literature. For example, most studies have focused on the individual-level effects of OPT, with little attention paid to the community-level effects. Additionally, most of the existing research presents a Eurocentric perspective on OPT, which is usually related to natural disasters (Murthy et al, 2006), or conflicts in Western contexts (Shulga, 2008), overlooking the unique experiences and contexts of non-Western communities, such as the impact of war, displacement, and cultural trauma on OPT in Middle Eastern or South Asian regions like Afghan War and the issue of Kashmir. This undue absorption with the trauma of developed countries is in contradiction with the nature of trauma discourse, which in Caruth's words "implicates us in each other's trauma" (1995). *Born Under a Million Shadows* offers a unique opportunity to explore the role of OPT in trauma narratives coming from less advanced and non-Western country, and to examine how such narratives can be used to promote individual and collective healing.

Research Methodology

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Drawing upon a qualitative research design, this study seeks to investigate the role of OPT in trauma narratives, using content analysis and narrative research techniques. Close reading strategy has been used for the collection of data (themes, episodes and instances of OPT) from the primary source, *Born Under a Million Shadows*, analyzing various traumatic episodes in the novel with respect to the secondary source, Tal's theory of other people's trauma OPT (1996). The research has also relied upon other studies by scholars and critics, available on literary archives and online libraries, in this literary paradigm, to solidify and provide deep insights to this study. The analysis has been done, for the most part, by the researchers themselves, except for the literary insights borrowed from other studies where due credit have been given to the corresponding studies with in-text citation and furnishing the references at the end.

Theoretical Framework

On theoretical grounds the research is fueled by Tal's theory of other people's trauma (OPT) which emerged in his acclaimed work, *Words of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (1996). OPT is a phenomenon where people having traumatic experiences engage and interact with other people with similar experiences, finding meaning and solidarity through these interactions (Tal, 1996). Such interactions foster empathy and solidarity among the victims of trauma and lead them to resilience and community building and collective healing (Herman, 1997). OPT recognizes that war trauma is not solely associated with individual suffering; it is a collective experience which is modified and modifies socio-political-cultural contexts. This reciprocity of OPT ultimately leads to a sense of community, solidarity and shared experience.

The narratives of trauma are based on harrowing incidences, which deal with how collective healing and growth can be achieved (Herman, 1997). These narratives provide a platform for individuals to process their traumatic experiences, find meaning, and

connect with others who have experienced similar traumas (Brisson, 2002). Through trauma narratives, individuals can begin to make sense of their experiences and find a sense of purpose and meaning.

While arguing that the narratives produced by the trauma survivors should be evaluated with reference to some original experience of author in the past, Tal puts excessive emphasis on the importance of the author. However, I have not intended to trace the texts selected for analysis for the study to relate directly back to the incidents of authors' lives. Tal suggests and allows the critical insights of trauma theory to be applied usefully to the literary representations of trauma to suit one's purpose. This study, keeping in view this suggestion, takes liberty to propose its own use of works from that field. Tal's ratification of an "understanding of trauma" (p. 247) also points to a state where the interests of trauma literature and the theoretical perspectives of trauma intersect.

Community building involves fostering a sense of community and shared experience among individuals, promoting collective healing and recovery (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This especially becomes crucial in the face of advancing mutual support and collective efficacy among trauma survivors (Gilliland & Dunn, 2003).

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is the positive transition among individuals with traumatic past which is the direct result of bearing testimony to OPT by demonstrating empathy and understanding,

eventually leading to personal growth, community building and social connections (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). PTG enables the individuals to finally find purpose and meaning in apparently purposeless and meaningless experiences, and find a meaning and truth value in life. Social identity is feeling of belonging, the ethnic identity of a group of people who share common culture and way of life (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In context of traumatic transformation of an individual, as the logical consequence of traumatic experience, the person attains PTG by sharing his thoughts and feelings with others (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005).

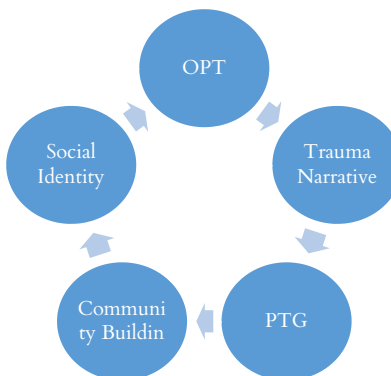
On the whole, this theoretical lens propagates that applying OPT in trauma narratives lead to greater autognition and community building and ensures speedy growth, recovery and community building, which in turn establishes social identity and shared experience. Having a good comprehension of these concepts on the part of witness, the individuals with traumatic experiences can be better assisted through their trauma and collective healing and PTG can be effectively promoted.

Conceptual Model

Based on the theoretical assumptions of this study the following model has been devised which guides the interpretation of various traumatic episodes of the novel;

Figure 1

Cycle of trauma, OPT and PTG



The cycle of trauma and recovery implies that trauma narratives engaging with OPT, help fostering empathy and solidarity paving the way for PTG which leads to community building and ultimately endows a new social identity in the society.

Analysis and Discussion

Busfield's *Born under a Million Shadows* (2009), can be seen as a clear expression of Tal's concept of OPT in many a way. From its portrayal of intergenerational trauma, childhood trauma and collective trauma of the whole country went under war several times in history; the novel portrays its peoples' resilience and power of recovery in the face of adversity. This trauma is a manifestation of OPT, perpetuated by the Taliban's oppressive regime and the various wars.

The novel represents the collective trauma of Afghans, especially post 9/11, and how it has affected their mental and physical well-being. The characters' experiences are intertwined, reflecting the collective nature of OPT. The title of the novel, "*Born Under a Million Shadows*," symbolizes the burden of trauma carried by the entire population born under the shadow of war and terror.

The protagonist, Fawad, is a young boy who has known nothing but grief since birth, exemplifying the impact of trauma on individuals and communities. Embodied in Fawad's journey is the profound truth that "trauma understands trauma" (Tal, 1996) as he, having experienced trauma himself, empathetically seeks out and resonates with the traumatic stories of others, exemplifying the powerful connection and understanding that can emerge between those who have endured similar pain. Fawad's experiences, as recounted in the novel, exemplify how other people's trauma can lead to trauma narratives and community building. The traumatic events he endured, including the loss of his family members and the rape attempt on his mother, are a testament to the devastating effects of war on civilians, especially children, on one side and on the other; these events also become a demonstration of how collective suffering can diffuse from one generation to another. He does not only

carry the burden of his own memories but also endures the trauma suffered by other people especially his mother's, whose traumatic past haunts not only her own present but also equally transmits in Fawad;

I am only a boy, but I recognized our life was difficult. Of course it had always been the same for me, I knew no different. But my mother with the memories of deep red cushions and yellow roses, was trapped in a past I had little knowledge of⁹. (Busfield, 2010, p. 16)

Through his memories and recollections, Fawad's story evolves into a powerful trauma narrative, underscoring the significance of storytelling in processing and transmitting trauma. He develops a profound sense of empathy and compassion by bearing witness to other peoples' narratives of trauma and the nuance of emotional undercurrents and challenges that he faces. During his remembering and mourning of his experiences, Fawad begins to process his trauma and tries to integrate his own story into the stories of many others who come across him. Tal describes that by doing this, the victim is enabled to transform his experience and revive back to normal life (1996, p. 119). Integrating and processing his trauma with others' trauma, Fawad contributes to the collective suffering, one which reverberates across time period and across generations. As he reflects upon the trauma of others, Fawad's mind becomes a canvas, serving to make a vivid portrait of the devastating effect of war on individuals and societies. The narrative turns into a gallery, poignantly displaying unique stories of trauma and survival, which call upon the protagonist to introspection and bearing witness on the experiences of others.

The story of Pir Hedri, a shopkeeper where Fawad works, relates a compelling tale of intergenerational trauma, as he has experienced several traumas during several wars that Afghanistan has undergone. Though he has been through a painful past, yet he has processed his trauma and has revived back to life, confronting and recovering from pain and misery. Listening to his stories, Fawad's own though processes activate his power of resilience and recovery; calling upon his

own retrospection and comprehension of nuances of war and trauma.

Contending with other people's trauma, Fawad recalls the destructive effects of war on children too, which further helps him develop a sense of empathy and compassion, eventually moving towards resilience and growth. He recalls the stories of his friends, like Spandi, who has lost his mother, sister, and father, leaving him alone and vulnerable. Fawad also remembers Jamila's struggles with poverty and malnutrition, her father's drug addiction prioritized over her basic needs. The image of the orphanage in Kabul, filled with children who have lost their parents, is etched in his mind, a poignant reminder of the war's psychosomatic toll on their young bodies and minds, manifesting in social isolation and other trauma-related struggles.

Tal suggests that through the memories and reflections of trauma suffered by an individual, intertwining his experiences with those of others, deepens the victim's understanding of the far-reaching effects of trauma and the importance of empathy and support in the healing process. Likewise, Fawad's thoughts become a testament to the power of shared human experience, acknowledging that "trauma understands trauma" (Tal, 1996), and that together, we can work towards recovery and resilience. Tal comments further;

Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and recall the story of the traumatic experience, to make it "real" both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for traumatized individual. (1996, p.21)

Khalid Khan's story serves as another poignant example of Other People's Trauma, as described by Kali Tal. His experiences illustrate the far-reaching impact of trauma on individuals and communities, highlighting the ways in which trauma can be transmitted and shared. The tragic loss of his family and the disability he suffers, become continuous reminders of war as an agent of destruction. The trauma he suffers is accompanied by its accessories such as guilt, shame and powerlessness; and psychosomatic as well as psychological wounds. For

Fawad, Khalid Khan's story becomes another picture in the picture gallery from where he draws courage and empathy and fights back his own trauma. His confrontation with Khalid Khan is a testament to the fact that bearing witness to other people's trauma creates solidarity and shared experience that serves to build a sense of community in face of collective suffering.

The trauma suffered by some other characters in the novel, such as that of Pir the Madman, serves as a representation of the communal trauma of the whole country, emphasizing the collective nature of OPT. The writer is not much eloquent, perhaps deliberately, on what exactly happened to him. Fawad's reaction to Pir's appearance highlights the ways in which Other People's Trauma can resonate with our own experiences, amplifying our emotions and empathetic responses. He confesses, "It made me sad to think that at some time in his life he must have been a boy like me with everything to look forward to" (237). By imagining Pir's story and connecting it to his own, Fawad demonstrates the power of empathy in bridging individual traumas and fostering a sense of shared humanity. This is because OPT enables him to process his own traumatic experiences through the lens of others, facilitating a sense of validation and recognition. By seeing his own experiences reflected in the narratives of others, he begins to make sense of his trauma and develop a sense of control and agency over his experiences. This, in turn, leads to increased resilience and PTG..

The novel also illustrates the far-reaching consequences of war on the social and economic fabric of Afghanistan, exemplifying the collective nature of trauma. The characters' experiences with poverty, hunger, disease, and oppression under the Taliban regime serve as a testament to the ways in which trauma can be perpetuated and transmitted through generations. The description of violence and abuse, from the big men fighting over territory to the beatings of children and animals, underscores the cyclical nature of trauma and the need for empathy and understanding in breaking these cycles.

In all these tales the protagonist, Fawad, experiences secondary witnessing, as he hears stories

of trauma from his family and community. This empathetic engagement with others' trauma aligns with Tal's concept of secondary witnessing and the ethical implications of engaging with OPT., ultimately leading to post-traumatic growth (PTG). Fawad's processing and movement towards PTG is a multifaceted journey. Through secondary witnessing, he empathetically engages with the trauma of others, aligning with Tal's concept of secondary witnessing. His scepticism and "secret agent" (39) behavior indicate a desire to control and make sense of his environment, reflecting his attempts to process his trauma. Despite bearing testimony to death and misery, Fawad's love for his country grows, showcasing resilience and a capacity to find hope amidst adversity. Moreover, his self-perceived ordinariness, being "a tiny little nobody that nobody cared about" (77), and lack of specialness make his trauma relatable and ordinary, allowing him to confront and work through it. Finally, Fawad's power of retrospection, acknowledged by his mother, enables him to reflect on his experiences and share his story, facilitating PTG and healing. Through these aspects, Fawad demonstrates a trajectory towards PTG, traversing his trauma through empathetic engagement, self-reflection, national pride, ordinariness, and the power of storytelling. This journey allows him to transform his traumatic experiences into a source of strength and resilience, ultimately finding a path towards healing and recovery.

Similar trauma is suffered by Fawad's mother, which she grapples with and tries to work through, aligning her suffering and recovery with Tal's theory of OPT. though she tries to shun the memories of traumatic past, but the occasional reminders revive the pain, guilt and shame. Eventually, aided by OPT, in form of Sheer Ahmad's company who also bears the tragic loss of his wife, she begins to develop empathy and understanding, and finally works through her trauma and achieves PTG. Previously fighting back with her past, she finds a sense of purpose and hope in future, demonstrating the possibility of growth and recovery.

The story of the novel successfully portrays the ability of Afghans to navigate in the face of adversity,

lining up with Tal's advocacy of collective healing and recovery in contexts of OPT. Fawad's story exemplifies how OPT may lead to shared experience and community building. Rather than being isolated, Fawad's advantage lies in his extrovert nature which helps him build interconnections with his family, community and nation which in turn helps him recover and achieve PTG more speedily. The narrative that he builds, serves as a testimony to Tal's theory, highlighting that story telling in the face of trauma becomes a powerful tool to build empathy and compassion which paves the way for PTG, recovery and community building.

Conclusion

The discussion in the preceding section illustrates the power of storytelling and socialization of the victims in promoting PTG, recovery and revival to life. the study also concludes that the trauma narratives such as that engaged in the novel *Born under a Million Shadows*, depict the effective use of OPT in creating empathy, solidarity and compassion among survivors of various forms of trauma, and lead to collective healing, recovery and PTG. Fawad's own traumatic experience juxtaposed with the secondary suffering of other people in order to attain empathy and solidarity, is in accordance with Tal's concepts. The study also finds that interweaving personal grieves with the collective suffering of the nation also speeds up the process of recovery and growth which is manifest through the stories of Fawad, his mother and Shir Ahmad.

Recommendations

The present study is delimited to an Afghan novel written in the context of Taliban regime, portraying its characters' traumatic experiences; their resilience and power to navigate adversity through OPT. The future research can be carried out in other novels written in other contexts such as Kashmir conflict, Iraq-US War and Syrian War etc. also this study is restricted to one novel, the future researchers can do a comparative analysis of different texts for their thematic, stylistic or content analysis in this literary paradigm. Moreover, the study deals with a war novel

and the trauma related to atrocities of war, the future suffering, such as flood of 2023 and the earthquake of research can be directed to other settings of collective 2005 in Pakistan.

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