



The underlying theme of Psychological Trauma in the selected works of Mills & Boon

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ABSTRACT - Mills and Boon novels are flagbearers of writing Romance. One of the most admired and examined literary genres is romance, and psychology plays a significant part in helping us understand characters and the literary work as a whole. Psychological trauma is frequently criticised for being used as an expedient and convenient justification for events. Most people perceive trauma as a very distressing experience that has a major negative impact on their internal emotional organisation and perspective of the outside world. The focus of this study is on how psychological trauma appears as a structural and psychoanalytic element in the selected texts and how it significantly advances the plot in novels. The selected texts are taken in the timeframe post 2010 where the modern man lives in an abysmal environment. This study not only offers a new perspective on the well-known Mills and Boon books, but also provides a profound understanding of the mental dynamics of the lead characters.

Key words – romance, psychological trauma, psychoanalysis, structure, mills & boon etc

INTRODUCTION-

The genre of romance is eye candy and food for soul at the same time. Romance literature is mostly centred on the emotional connection between characters and is frequently centred on themes of love, passion, and desire. By

allowing readers to identify with the characters on a personal level, these themes encourage readers' emotional engagement with the characters and their stories and also provide a delicious escape from the grim realities of life. The relatability and escape provided by romantic narratives can improve and increase reader enjoyment. Due to reader expectations for specific aspects and norms within the genre, romance novels very strongly exhibit a formulaic nature. Some common structures of the romance genre include - A hero and heroine who are initially at odds with each other or come from different worlds, a romantic conflict that keeps the hero and heroine apart, turning point in the story where the hero and heroine realize their feelings for each other, a happy ending that brings the hero and heroine together. However, it seems that this formula does not acknowledge the structure of psychological trauma in the lives of the lead characters. Addressing psychological trauma in romance novels can be of vital importance to promote awareness, understanding, and empathy around this overlooked and neglected issue.

The popularity of reading romantic fiction has been proved multiple times by Mills and Boon books who cater to the hunger of reading romance. Mills & Boon as a publication company have been asserting their dominance since 1908 and was founded by Gerald Rusgrove Mills and Charles Boon. Psychology and literature are two disciplines that investigate the human psyche and the genre of romance serves as a fundamental cornerstone in establishing the relationship between literature and psychology. Cathy Caruth, one of the leading figures of Trauma theory in literature defines trauma as "*it is a wound inflicted not upon the body, but upon the mind*" (Caruth, 3) in her book titled *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. It was published in the year 1996. Psychological trauma can be used to explain why a character might struggle with emotional intimacy or have difficulty trusting others. The aim of this paper is to identify the origin of psychological trauma and its manifestation in the lives of the protagonists, both of which indicate that it is an underlying theme of the primary texts. Sigmund Freud is the first among the many to dive deep into the matters of 'trauma' and 'personality'. Freud's psychoanalytic theories of the 'Id, Ego, Superego', 'Psychosexual Stages' and 'Defence mechanisms', will provide the lens to examine the trauma inflicted on the minds of the lead characters.

A key component of Freud's psychoanalytic theory is the idea of the id, ego, and superego. Id is completely in the unconscious mind. This idea holds that the Id stands for our innate, primal drives, such as our drive for pleasure and our desire to avoid discomfort. The superego is a representation of our internalised morality and values, whereas the ego is a representation of our logical, reasoning self. These three aspects of the psyche are susceptible

to going out of balance, resulting in a condition of psychological anguish that may emerge as trauma. People may feel split between their impulses and their sense of morality when the id and superego are at odds. This may cause internal unrest and contribute to the emergence of trauma.

Psychological Trauma may also emerge as a result of the psychosexual stages of personality development that are discussed in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. These phases, which are linked to personality development, are characterised by the manifestation and change of a person's sexual energy or libido. Each stage corresponds to certain developmental tasks, and challenges or interruptions during these stages may contribute to the emergence of psychological trauma. The Psychosexual stages include –

- Oral stage (0-18 months): This stage is characterized by the infant's attention on oral activities, such as sucking and biting.
- Anal stage (18 months-3 years): This stage is characterized by the child's attention on bowel movements and toilet training. The primary developmental task is the establishment of self-sufficiency and self-control.
- Phallic stage (3-6 years): This stage is characterized by the child's focus on their genitals and the Oedipal/Electra complex. The primary developmental task is the establishment of gender identity and the resolution of the Oedipal/Electra complex.
- Latency stage (6-12 years): This stage is characterized by the child's attention on cognitive and social development. The primary developmental task is the establishment of healthy relationships with peers and the development of social skills.
- Genital stage (12 years and beyond): This stage is characterized by the re-emergence of sexual energy and the development of mature sexual relationships. The primary developmental task is the establishment of healthy sexual relationships.

According to Sigmund Freud's theory of defence mechanisms, people employ a variety of psychological techniques to fend off anxiety and distress that comes with psychological trauma. Defence mechanisms might help people cope in the short term in case of stressful situations, but they can also help people develop and maintain psychological trauma. Defence mechanisms can inhibit people from processing and integrating their experiences, which can lead to the development and maintenance of psychological trauma. Some common defence mechanisms include – regression, repression, suppression, denial, displacement, projection etc.

ANALYSIS OF TEXTS-

A) **A Baby to Bind His Bride**

Billionaire CEO Leonidas Betancur, presumed dead following a horrific accident, is unaware of the promises he made four years ago. But after being located by his wife, Susannah, he begins to remember things again. Susannah, who was left in her bridal gown and thought she was a widow, now wants Leonidas to take back his empire so she may be free. Susannah's psychological trauma lies in the fact that she was married off to Leonidas Betancur when she was just 19 years old, a teenager. She was bargained off as part of a fruitful deal' by her controlling parents and was asked to save her virginity for the same. *"Little Susannah who had been thrown to him like bait all those years ago, a power move by her loathsome parents and a boon to his own devious family, because he'd always avoided innocence"* (Crews, 2017). After Leonidas's alleged death, Susannah had to handle the family's business and also avoid Leonidas's ill-intentioned cousins, who would prey on her power. In the case of Leonidas, he suffered not only from psychological trauma but from physical trauma as well. Leonidas survived an almost-fatal plane crash, leading him to lose his memory—amnesia. Apart from this, Leonidas had a very difficult, brutal, and physically abusive upbringing devoid of love and support. *"His childhood, one vicious beating after the next as his father 'prepared' him for life as the Betancur heir. His mother's carelessness and total lack of interest in protecting her child from these rampages, as none of it concerned her directly"* (Crews, 2017). He was moulded to become the heir of Betancur Corporation, ultimately losing out on all the wonderful childhood experiences. When it comes to the three stages of personality, Susannah strongly exhibits all three strong characteristics: id, ego, and superego. Her traumatic experiences, such as being forced into marriage and having to handle the family's business, may have triggered a strong desire to assert her autonomy and pursue her own goals; hence, she asks for a divorce from Leonidas as soon as he gets back his memory. Susannah, after playing the part of a 'widow' for four years, had just enough and wanted an escape so bad that even her body posed a strong rebellion. She was also concerned with the fact that Leonidas wouldn't 'see' her as his wife anymore and would quickly jump ship. To instantly avoid all these negative beliefs, she strongly asserted the idea of a divorce. It's also possible that Susannah's ego is strong, as she has had to navigate complex social and business situations to maintain her power and protect herself from harm. Betancur Corporation was so large that it was spread across continents like Europe, Australia, North America, etc. Right after her husband's alleged death, she handled the business perfectly, not letting

anyone step on her shoes for 4 years. Her ability to take on such responsibilities and handle them competently suggests a strong ego. It's probable that Susannah's superego is also strong, as she may feel a sense of duty or responsibility to uphold her husband's legacy and choose to remain a widow until finding out about what actually happened with Leonidas. *"Susannah had been a widow for all of her marriage. And she deliberately maintained that position these past four years because it was that or succumb to a far worse situation"* (Crews, 2017). She maintained a certain level of moral integrity in all her years of widowhood by not giving in to the vicious proposals of Leonidas's manipulative cousins and also by not agreeing to remarry – holding a strong sense of moral consciousness.

Leonidas exhibits a strong id that overpowers his ego and superego. The id is the instinctual, primal portion of the mind that looks for instant gratification for impulses and desires. It's certainly possible that Leonidas has a strong id, especially in terms of his need to survive and protect himself. During his time as 'the Count' at the Idaho compound, he was nothing less than a god. All his needs were attended to instantly: *"they fed him and they clothed him and they followed him"* (Crews, 2017) His instinctive need to defend himself may have been strengthened by his terrible experiences, such as the plane accident, his violent and abusive upbringing, and his ability to fend off his devious family from taking over the Betancur Corporation after his return from the plane crash.

While addressing the psychosexual stages, Leonidas seems to be fixated in the phallic stage, where the same sex parents become the 'enemy'. As Leonidas's father was physically abusive to him since his childhood, it is possible that Leonidas suffered from beatings in his phallic stage as well. So, the concept of 'enemy' went beyond this stage and was manifested until the death of his father, resulting in Leonidas's fixation in the phallic stage. His father became the evil character and disrupted his ability to resolve conflicts successfully. *"I have never loved anything in life.... I doubt I am capable"* (Crews, 2017). A person may become fearful or incapable of close affection if the dispute at this stage is not resolved. Hence, when Susannah finally tries to accept Leonidas's importance in her life, Leonidas lets his intrusive thoughts win and packs her off to Australia along with his unborn child, thinking that he is incapable of loving her and starting a new family. In the case of Susannah, she doesn't seem to be fixated in any of the psychosexual stages and functions healthily without any conflict in the stages.

Addressing the defence mechanisms practised by the romantic hero and heroine are compensation and intellectualization. Susannah was enrolled in a high-end boarding school in Switzerland at a very young

age. She was put in one so that she could learn the manners and etiquette of a lady who would later become a wealthy yet powerful man's trophy wife. Rightfully so, her parents made her marry the very rich and influential Leonidas Betancur. But, after his alleged death, Susannah never fit into the role of a trophy wife but instead took over Leonidas's role and ran his business successfully. Susannah used the defence mechanism of compensation by putting all her energy and focus into her business after her husband's death, in order to compensate for her feelings of helplessness and lack of control in her personal life prior to her marriage.

By conducting a detached and logical analysis of the event, Leonidas was able to separate himself from the feelings brought on by letting go of Susannah. His mother was behind the plot for the plane crash. His perception of his own mother was like a cage to him, and he broke away from that cage when he realised his own mother wanted him dead. Leonidas put Susannah in a similar cage by taking her to Greece against her wishes. His realisation that he himself had put Susannah in a cage brings out his intellect, and he takes actions accordingly after a detached and logical analysis of the event. This defence mechanism aided him in keeping emotional control and preventing feelings of overload.

B) Prince's Son of Scandal

Trella Sauveterre, a recluse heiress, breaks free for one night from the debilitating effects of her childhood kidnapping when she gives in to a rebellious seduction and unintentionally becomes pregnant. Trella is quite uncomfortable being in the spotlight, therefore she cannot stand to become pregnant in the public eye and hides the father of her child. The incident is then linked to Crown Prince Xavier of Elazar by a tabloid photo of them sharing a kiss. Xavier goes to great lengths, including abducting Trella, to get his child back. Xavier now needs to legalise his son and also make Trella his royal bride.

When it comes to identifying their psychological trauma, Trella was abducted in her childhood and sexually abused which resulted in her having an eating disorder and constant panic attacks. *"She would have to reveal exactly how crazy she was. She would have to explain these ghouls tickling across her skin, making her want to scratch herself all over. The nightmare could spring to life with a beat of her heart, the cold sweats and shaking, the profound helplessness"* (Collins, 2017). Psychological trauma can more often than not be the reason behind panic attacks. The physical symptoms of a panic attack, which include a rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, and difficulty breathing, are abrupt, acute episodes of anxiety and fear and

the same was described by Trella. Xavier as a child was deprived of unconditional love and support due to the separation of his parents – causing great distress and turmoil in both their lives. *“They didn’t act like parents.... Neither were a great example of the importance of sibling relationships, either. I was young, but I picked up on jealousy and resentment”* (Collins, 2017). The experience of being deprived of unconditional love and support due to the separation of parents can be traumatic for Xavier. Individuals who experience this kind of family disruption or upheaval might strongly feel a sense of abandonment, confusion, and loss, and these feelings can have long-lasting effects on their emotional and psychological well-being.

While talking about the three stages of personality. Trella’s id seems to dominate the other two aspects. When the id outweighs the ego and superego, individuals may behave impulsively without thinking about the consequences. This could lead to destructive behaviour. During the initial meeting between Trella and Xavier, Trella disguised herself as her twin sister, Angelique. Xavier thought of Trella as being Angelique and proposed an offer for a one-night stand, but Trella’s primal desires overpowered her morals, she did not reveal her true identity, and she gave into the seduction, ultimately leading to her pregnancy. In the case of Xavier, his superego dominates his id and ego. When the superego is dominant, individuals may feel intense guilt even for minor mistakes or perceived shortcomings. Xavier put his duty as a king above his personal feelings for Trella and even agreed to an arranged marriage for the betterment of his kingdom.

Addressing the psychosexual stages, Trella seems to be fixated in the latency stage. Trella was kidnapped in her childhood, in a stage where cognitive and social skills are focused upon. *“The family had a tragic history. One of the twin girls had been kidnapped as a child. She was rumoured to be batty, so they kept her out of sight”* (Collins, 2017). Now in her adulthood she has problems forming relationships, struggles with self-reliance and constantly relies on the support provided by her immediate family.

While articulating defence mechanisms, Trella thinks that she is not capable enough to be Xavier’s bride; to be the queen of Elazar due to her panic attacks and vulnerable state of mental health. Trella is most likely to use ‘self-handicapping’ in this scenario. Self-handicapping is a defence mechanism that individuals may use to protect themselves from failure and preserve their self-esteem. Trella is using her panic attacks as a way to avoid the potential rejection or failure that may come with the responsibility of becoming the Queen of Elazar.

C) His Majesty's Temporary Bride

Cat's childhood has been anything but affluent as the secret daughter of royalty and an illegitimate child. She is adamantly opposed to going back to her childhood home after years of bullying. Nevertheless, her half-sister, the princess, Amelie, has vanished without a trace before she marries the charming King Alexander. Cat agrees to fill in for her half-sister, but she wasn't ready for the intense attraction she feels for Alex.

When it comes to identifying their psychological trauma, Cat and her mother's reputations were tarnished for life because of Cat's illegitimacy of birth. Cat's stepfather was paid to marry Cat's mother and was physically abusive to them. This suggests that Cat's mother was forced into a marriage with a physically abusive stepfather, possibly as a means of providing a more socially acceptable family structure for Cat, as Cat was an illegitimate royal child. The combination of these factors had a significant impact on Cat and her mother's lives, potentially leading to ongoing challenges and difficulties that would cause great psychological trauma. *"She'd never been Catherine except to her stepfather, the man who'd treated her mother as a drudge and her as a disgusting burden despite the largesse he'd received for giving them his name"* (West, 2017). The fact that her illegitimacy was the cause of her and her mother's reputational damage led to feelings of shame, guilt, and unworthiness. The physical abuse from her stepfather caused feelings of fear, helplessness, and anger. These experiences affected Cat's self-esteem, ability to form healthy relationships, and overall mental wellbeing.

Alex, on the other hand, had to give up his career in order to rule his nation, the state of Bengaria. Alex's uncle, Stefan, was the rightful heir to the throne, but due to his untimely demise, the throne shifted to Alex's father and then ultimately to Alex. Alex's father was of a devious nature. He wasn't faithful in his marriage and drowned his country, Bengaria, in debt due to his poor financial decision making – it was now up to Alex to fix things. *"His late and unlamented father. The man who'd almost bankrupted Bengaria in the years he'd been Stefan's Regent and later the King. The man whose chicanery and double-dealing had milked the nation almost to a standstill, leaving Alex to haul an economic nightmare out of the red and into the black."* (West, 2017). The passage presents a critical perspective of the father's leadership and suggests that Alex faced significant challenges due to his father's actions.

While talking about the three aspects of personality, Cat seems to be high on the superego. Cat was impersonating her half-sister Amelie and agreed to have an affair with Alex. Alex also gave in to his desires,

thinking Cat was Amelie. *"The knowledge of what she had to do was a weight dragging at her belly, making her wish she could stay in her room and not face him. But it had to be done."* (West, 2017). Cat couldn't take the royal hand-me-downs anymore and felt that if she didn't reveal the truth to Alex, she would be betraying him. Cat was very focused on her moral and ethical values and chose to prioritise these over her own desires and impulses to continue her affair with Alex. Cat is also very disciplined, conscientious, and responsible and may hold herself to high standards of behaviour. Alex's father had been an autocrat, he probably had a powerful superego that imposed severe guidelines and demands on Alex and the rest of the family. This might have led to Alex growing up in a regimented, authoritarian environment with limited room for personal expression or discovery. It is also possible that Alex's experience of his father's autocratic behaviour could have influenced the development of his own superego, leading him to internalise similar values and rigidity. Due to this, he detested deception. His father's conniving and manipulation had given him an abhorrence for liars; hence, Alex acted out in a rash manner when Cat revealed true identity without even giving her a chance to explain herself.

While talking about the psychosexual stages, Cat seems to be fixated in her latency stage. *"She'd been rejected by both the King and the man paid... paid to be her father! No wonder Cat held herself apart from everyone else."* (West, 2017). In Cat's formative years, where her social skills ought to have been developed, she was ostracised not only by the community but by her own parental figures, and therefore she remains too aloof to form any relationships of substance.

Addressing the defence mechanisms used by Cat, sublimation strongly resonates with her. Sublimation allows individuals to express their inner drives and desires in constructive and socially acceptable ways. As Cat was bullied in her childhood, she felt strongly against injustice and the need to protect people. To channel these inner drives, Cat decided to work as a bodyguard. Even while being at the royal house, she decides to give swimming and personal defence classes to a boy who was bullied and nearly drowned himself. The defence mechanism of 'reaction formation' is also observed in the case of Cat. It is a process by which a person transforms an unacceptable or socially inappropriate impulse or behaviour into its opposite. Cat became a tomboy, rebelling against the inevitable comparisons between her and the graceful and ultrafeminine Princess Amelie. Cat thought that it was easier for tomboys to pretend not to be hurt by insults.

CONCLUSION - Overall, the findings of this research point to the complexity and nuance of the intersection between psychology and romance. This study sheds light on the complex relationship between psychological trauma and romantic relationships. The findings suggest that individuals who have experienced trauma may struggle with forming and maintaining intimate relationships due to a range of psychological and interpersonal factors. Romance being formulaic in its nature, had overlooked to address the presence of psychological trauma as a structure in the lives of the main characters. Specifically, it was found that both the protagonists (romantic hero and heroine) experienced psychological trauma in their lives in the selected primary texts. The trauma that they experienced lead to attachment insecurities, emotional dysregulation, and maladaptive relationship patterns that hindered relationship satisfaction and stability and also at the same time provided scope of the story to develop further and reach its 'happy ending'

The readership of Mills & Boon is immense. This study reflects on the understanding of psychological trauma and its deep-rooted presence in the novels. The trauma experienced by the hero and heroine builds their character and provides the right impetus for the writer to develop the story with literary nuances. Even though, Freud's concepts of psychoanalysis are contested and much debated upon, but one cannot undermine their importance and significance in the field of psychology. Romance novels due to their wide circulation and readership allow writers to explore themes that can touch the lives of individuals. Addressing psychological trauma in romance will not only bring awareness to this neglected area but also remove the stigma that is associated with mental health.

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