



ENCAPSULATING THE HAUNTING MEMORIES IN JENNIFER JOHNSTON'S *THIS IS NOT A NOVEL*

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Abstract : "Trauma creates change you don't choose. Healing is about creating change you do choose."
– Michelle Rosenthal

A traumatic event is a terrifying, risky, or cruel event that affects the integrity of a person's life. Traumatic experiences can stimulate strong emotions in the mind of the victim, which persist long after its occurrence. When trauma is weighed down, anxiety, defenselessness, or panic, as well as physiological reactions will worsen the life of the subject. Jennifer Johnston, an Irish novelist is well versed in handling trauma in her novels. In her novel *This is not a Novel*, she portrays the life of Imogen, a carefree adolescent girl whose life is turned upside down by the continuous heartbreaking events. This paper focuses on the traumatic experience of Imogen and her path towards the hope despite being overwhelmed by the intensity of physical and emotional responses.

Keywords : Adolescent, Anxiety, Memories, Struggle, Trauma.

INTRODUCTION

A traumatic experience is the most powerful, terrific and cruel event which affects the integrity of a person's life. Traumatic experiences are all pervasive which stimulate strong emotions in the mind of the victim which persists long after its occurrence. As trauma becomes an integral part of life, people cannot evade it. When trauma is weighed down, anxiety, panic, helplessness as well as physiological reactions overwhelm the life of the subject. By responding to the distressing and deeply disturbing events, people are subjected to lose the control of the self and the ability to cope up with the life progression. They are bound to experience the various unpredictable emotions such as fear, emptiness, frustration, flashbacks and strained relationships.

HAUNTING MEMORIES OF IMOGEN

Trauma and its onslaught become the focal point of the world and people are started to look on the various aspects of trauma at different angles. Jennifer Johnston is an award winning novelist of Irish literature, who is well versed in handling trauma in her novels. Her novels especially pinpoint the estranged relationships in the familial background. In her novel, *This is not a novel*, she portrays the life of Imogen, a carefree teenage girl who is exposed to experience interpersonal trauma due to the continuous upsetting events in her family. This paper focuses on the traumatic experience of Imogen and her difficulties to cope

up with the inexhaustible puzzles of life and her path towards the hope despite being overwhelmed by the intensity of physical and emotional responses.

The potential sources of human misfortunes are unlimited. Traumatic events can be categorized in two ways : natural disasters like flood, hurricanes, earthquakes etc and man-made calamities like acts of terror, war, abuse, betrayal and violence. When the source of trauma is another human being, who is close to the victim, this kind of trauma is said to be interpersonal trauma. When people come across any problems, difficulties or loss, they find comfort, security or stability from their closed ones. Interpersonal trauma is quite contrary to this phenomenon as the unbearable pain is given by the closed circle, which breaks the inner core of trust in the victims and their outlook of the world.

Johnston presents the life of Imogen as retrospection from adulthood to childhood. The novel opens with 48 years old Imogen's attempt of writing a message to her brother Johnny. She still believes that her brother is alive somewhere in the corner of the world. She just hopes that her message of love will reach him. As a sister, she is pinned for the affection of her brother for thirty years. In reality, he was dead by drowning in the sea. Her mind is not accepting the fact of Johnny's death. The shock and denial are the typical responses of trauma. When her father revealed the death of Johnny to Imogen in the nursing home at the age of eighteen, she is startled and ignored her father's words. The following lines exposes how her mind is blackened the day from her life :

Imogen,' he called after me, and I paid no heed.

Imogen.

When I reached my room on the first floor, I took a from the table by my bed and, pressing hard on the ball pen point, I blackened out the date: 27 September, a beautiful autumn day, no longer existed. (Johnston 9)

Negotiating the traumatic experience is the most crucial step for the survivors of the trauma. Johnston makes Imogen to negotiate traumatic experiences by retrospecting the memories of the past as a way of moving ahead of life. The severity of trauma determines the level of trauma. The most elevated emotion of the traumatic person is fear. Fear engulfs the sense of the person and makes them to construct a wall against the real world. When the news of Johnny's death is exposed, Imogen is getting treatment at the nursing home for losing her voice. The death of Johnny adds more terror to her mind. The loss of her only confidant is unacceptable for Imogen as her reliance on others is already faded away by the betrayal and infidelity of her trusted relations.

Looking back at the memory lane, her life is cheerful at the age of sixteen with her parents and brother Johnny. She spends most of her time with her Johnny in the sea. Johnny is a national level swimmer, trained from his childhood. Her happy life can be traced down from the following lines:

As a child I loved the echo. I used to stand on the lawn and sing, loud as I could manage, and the words would come back garbled, but recognisable themselves.

'I want to be happy, but I can't be happy till I make you happy toooo.'

The answering echo seemed like a promise to me. I used to wonder from time to time what the birds nesting on the cliff thought when they were bombarded with useless sound. (36)

The innocence of Imogen is short lived. The entry of Bruno, Johnny's friend and German teacher changes the life of entire family. Bruno seems to be a very friendly person to everyone. The trio Johnny, Bruno and Imogen start to gather together and explore the sea. Imogen falls in love with Bruno and he also reciprocates the same feelings towards her. From a child perspective, Imogen's life is all set with her family and Bruno.

Life is not what we think as real. Imogen's protected life is completely shattered when she witnessed the affair of her mother Sylvia and Bruno with her own eyes. She is totally devastated by the harsh truth laid before her. The first person she wanted to have shelter on is her brother Johnny, who is staying in the hostel. Unconsciously, she rides the bus to Johnny where she is shaken by another great blow. When she reveals her love and Bruno's affair with their mother, Johnny composes himself and discloses his love with Bruno. She is not disgusted with her brother's identity instead she understands his stand of emotion. Imogen is distressed with the continuous revelations of truths and realises the dirty tricks of Bruno on her entire family.

Being exposed to the potential traumatic events by the family in the childhood is the major catastrophe in the developmental stages of the children. Their behaviour and attitude are strongly influenced by the trauma throughout their whole lifespan. Imogen's life is changed overnight. As a result of dumping

all the secrets in the mind, she lost her voice in the morning. The psyche of Imogen is more terrified by the exposure of events. She is astonished how sleep engulfs her in this condition.

I slept sweetly, no dreams, no startled jerks into wakefulness, no disturbances of any sort, and when I woke in the morning I discovered that I had lost my voice. Of course, I didn't know for some time. Although I had slept I woke quite unrefreshed, my head in a whirl of confusion, ... knew I should get up, but I wanted to stay where I was, to cover my head, to be alone in darkness.(198)

Without understanding her true state, she is admitted in the nursing home for her recovery. For six months, she stays aphonic. The psyche had totally withdrawn her voice. Though she denies the death of Johnny, she reminds herself not to mention Johnny until she escapes from the nursing home.

When she starts to speak again, she wants to reveal the truth. But the continuous interruption from medical team in the name of treatment makes her doubt her own conscious and truth. She wrapped the truth inside her. As a child, her perceptions of events are seen as imaginative. Despite the confusions, she can see things clearly and her mind can understand and differentiate the truth and lie. They see her spoken truth as a child's mere fantasy. This is not only in the case of Imogen, words of children, who suffered different types of trauma, is not taken seriously. Her silent tears are the only companion to her miseries.

My spoken truth.

When I came here first and began to speak again. I tried to speak the truth to them, the doctors, the nurses and those counsellors, and they confused me with their drugs and their spinning reasoning, until I began to question my own truth. But now, with Johnny's disappearance, I knew that my only madness was to think that they might have believed me in the first place. (37)

CONCLUSION

As an adult, Imogen stirs up memories of the past in order to write a letter to her brother. She still hopes that her brother will visit her someday. She envisions the meeting of two aged people and how their interaction will be. The character of Imogen is deeply affected by the traumatic events of her family. Even though she gets back her voice, the denial of her brother's death is evident for her traumatic state. Being traumatized at the age of eighteen, her life is still traumatized at the age of forty eight. By revisiting the past, she overcame the betrayal of Bruno and Sylvia. Johnny's death seems to be more traumatic to her. She relieves her pain of betrayal but not the pain of losing her brother.

By encapsulating the haunting memories of Imogen, Johnston makes an attempt to bring out the effects of childhood trauma and how their traumatic experiences are treated in the society. By associating childhood trauma with the interpersonal trauma, it is evident that children are suffering from unspeakable trauma. Like Imogen, there are still people living with their traumatic episodes on their day today life.

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