



Studying Trauma, Personal loss, Flashbacks and Recurring Tragedy during World War II: A Critical Analysis of the Grave of the Fireflies

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Abstract

Japan had seen a devastating situation during World War II. The narratives of war survivors of that time are the most important testimony to know the inner psychological struggle of war survivors. The film, *the Grave of the Fireflies* records the war-torn situation of Japan and the struggle of the people who lost their loved ones. Set in the background of World War II the film shows the air-bombing at Kobe. Most of the houses are destroyed and the two protagonists of the film, Seita and Setsuko lose their parents. This paper concentrates on the psychological battle that they have gone through together. Originally, the film is an adaptation of the short story of the same name by Akiyuki Nosaka. And the story is a semi-autobiographical. Akiyuki had lost his adoptive father and his sister in war and lost his adoptive sister, Keiko to malnutrition. And this story is written as an apology to his deceased sister as he feels responsible for Keiko's death. Similarly enough, in the film Seita starts feeling responsible and cannot overcome the shock of his sister's death which causes him mental damage that he cannot come out from. The ghosts of Seita and Setsuko prepare the audiences for the traumatic journey they will go through, as the ghosts are witnessing their own past life which is embedded with pain and death. The personal loss, nightmares, PTSD, everything add fuel to the fire of the psychological damage of these two characters. Like many orphans of that time, they also have gone through famine and Seita has to loot the abandoned houses to survive. The horror of war, the national tragedy and the trauma drive these two characters towards their destined end.

Keywords

Trauma, fireflies, PTSD, dissociation, bombing.

During World War II, the people went through a traumatic experience that stayed with them forever. The film captures a story of a particular family during the firebombing at Kobe on 16th and 17th March 1945 which were campaigned by the United States. And in 1988, Isao Takahata recaptured this traumatic event in his anime film *The Grave of the Fireflies*. It shows the horror of the firebombing and its traumatic effect on people's life. According to the article "Bombing Kobe", "From February 4 to August 6 in 1945, the total amount of dropped bomb was 8000 tons and more than 1200 bombers in total crossed the sky" (Ogasawara 2011). Takahata's film, *The Grave of the Fireflies* shows the psychological struggles of two characters- Seita and Setsuko in war-torn Kobe where they fight to survive after losing their parents.

The movie starts with the dialogue "September 21st, 1945. That was the night I died.", which prepares the readers for the traumatic journey of the film. The red light is falling on fragile Seita who is already dead. The railway worker's checking of the bodies of refugees in the station and the comment "This one is gone too" prepares us for the horrifying reality. The only thing that Seita hold with him is a candy can which once belonged to his deceased sister, Setsuko. The last relic of his sister is thrown by a worker in a bush near the railway station. There the audience sees the old can is becoming a new one and the ghost of Seita is reuniting with Setsuko and returning their home in a ghostly train. The entire film is shown from the point of view of Seita's ghost. In the film, Seita's ghost is present just before any kind of painful scene in the movie as it warns

about the upcoming painful events that he, himself does not want to remember. The flashbacks of the ghost remind the audience how deep the scar is.

In the film, the red light becomes the representation of the traumatic life of every Japanese during World War II. And the ghosts of Seita and Setsuko are also portrayed under the red lights. It represents the horror of the war. In the article “In 75 Years Later Japan's Second World War Orphans Talk About Their Pain and Recovery”, a war survivor, Kisako Motoki, 86 confesses that the colour red reminds her of the night of the Great Tokyo Raid that happened on the 10th March 1945. They live amidst heaps of charred bodies. Interestingly enough, in the film too the ghosts are shown under red lights. While the ghosts of Seita and Setsuko travelling on a train, Seita notices how the image of fireflies is turning into the image of aircraft that are dropping bombs on his motherland. And the red atmosphere makes the fear of war more convincing. This image is the representation of the traumatic experiences that they both have gone through when they were alive. Most of the film is shown from the point of view of Seita, so the audience can get to see the psychological changes in the characters as the characters are the victims of the war. The flashbacks are the main backbone of the film. And the main story is connected in flashbacks.

It haunts post-war Japan for many decades. It is interesting to see that Akiyuki Nosaka's short story, “Grave of the Fireflies” on which this film is originally based is a semi-autobiographical piece. The short story recounts the incidents of the firebombing of Kobe. The author had himself suffered during World War II. He had lost his father and sisters during this time. He lost his younger adoptive sister to malnutrition. And he had written this story as an apology to his dead sister. The personal loss of Akiyuki is vividly captivated by the character of Seita. Like Akiyuki, Seita also loses his sister to malnutrition.

When the main story is starting Seita and his family are shifting to the shelter after hiding some necessary things such as food in their yard. At that time many families went to shelters to save themselves from the bombs. Here the audience can see how the houses are destroyed by firebombing. According to *Wikipedia* 650,000 houses are damaged in these bombings. Many people died this time. In the film, this horror of real life is shown vividly. And the effects of shell bombing, burning houses, and dead bodies on both of the siblings cause a huge amount of mental damage which is evident in the later part of the film. The real struggle starts when their mother is badly injured in firebombing and later died. Though it is hard for them to continue living without her mother they try their best to forget it and continue to live. It is never easy for them to endure such trauma as Andrea Brant while talking about parental loss says “The death of a loved one can be so devastating that our whole orientation in life feels lost. A loss that big can feel like an out-of-body experience.” The whole film captures how Seita and Setsuko lose their ways in life after losing both of their parents.

Children during war suffers the most. Setsuko's trauma is evident when she starts trembling after holding Seita's hand while seeing the burning houses. As Ed Tronik, a distinguished professor at the University of Massachusetts says in *The Body Keeps the Score* about children that “They are as much of the body as they are of the brain. Without language or symbols, infants use everyone of their biological systems to make meaning of themselves in relation to the world of things and people. Van der Kolk shows that those very same systems continue to operate at every age, and the traumatic experiences, especially chronic toxic experiences during early development, produce psyche devastation.”

Psychologist, Miss Dunsdon who belonged to the Bristol Child Guidance Clinic surveyed 8000 school students who were the witnesses of World War II and after examining them, she comes to a conclusion that the main symptoms of their psychological wounds are crying, trembling and nervousness. After her, Frank Bodman also showed that 11% of the surviving children who suffered heavily are the victims of air raids. And here also audiences can see how the early traumatic experiences of air raids carry devastation into the life of Seita and Setsuko.

As the story goes on the audience sees the two orphans taking shelter in their aunt's house but she is not welcoming them warmly. This misbehaviour also shows a real picture of Japan. According to the article, “In 75 Years Later Japan's Second World War Orphans Talk about Their Pain and Recovery” the orphans were bullied by their relatives and often “were called thrash and left to fend for themselves on the street.” And it is for this reason Seita decides to live in an abandoned shelter which causes them several health issues.

As the story progresses it is seen that the health of Seita and Setsuko is deteriorating. It can be said that these things happen because of malnutrition. During the time of World War II, it was not easy for someone to get ration. According to Cormac O' Grada “20-25 million civilians died of hunger-related disease outside Europe” and Japan at that time “was facing semi-starvation at war's end”. And abandoned children became a clear victims of this situation. At that time many children lived by polishing shoes or by pickpocketing according to the article “ In 75 Years Later Japan's Second World War Orphans Talk About Their Pain and Recovery”. In the film, Seita is seen looting the abandoned houses for meals, clothes for their survival. They are forced to eat frog guts. Perhaps it is because of hunger that Setsuko starts eating mud balls as rice balls in an absence of Seita which leads her towards malnutrition. Perhaps, her hunger causes her dissociation from reality and she forgets the difference between real and fake food. But more than the malnutrition it is the trauma that they have gone through that makes them weak. Even in *The Body Keeps the Score* it is told that the relentless war and disasters leave traces on its victim's mind and affect the capacity to hold any emotion such as joy, intimacy, biology even the immune system. This decay of immune systems somehow is reflected in *The Grave of Fireflies*. The very part of the human brain that is not so good at keeping in denial makes the body weak. As Bessel A. van der Kolk says in *The Body Keeps the Score* “ While we all want to move beyond, the part of our brain that is devoted to ensuring our survival (deep below our rational brain) is not very good at denial. It may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger and mobilize disturbed brain circuits and secrete massive amounts of stress hormones.” In the film also, the audience can see how the two siblings are trying to escape the trauma by going to the beach. And after reaching the beach they become happy for a short period but again the flashback of their mother and their happy life when she was alive comes back to haunt them. Later they see a mother meeting a daughter after a long time

and this incident breaks their heart as they know that they can never reunite with their mother for the rest of their life. These kinds of flashbacks are a kind of escape from the traumatic events that are associated with a particular person or thing. Seita's reminiscence of earlier days even before his death gives us a warning about his tendency to dissociation. Sometimes this tendency drives its victims to their expected death. Matthew Tull in his "Coping with Flashbacks and Dissociation in PTSD" says "Flashbacks are considered one of the re-experiencing symptoms of PTSD. In a flashback, you may feel or act as though a traumatic event is happening again." And here is also the symptoms of PTSD are evident as in the film we can see Seita becomes afraid of even normal aircraft. It can be said that Seita is also a victim of shell shock He is reminded of the traumatic experiences that he had gone through. The fire reminds him of his mother's body that is burnt in a mass burning like an insignificant creature like fireflies. As Bessel van der Kolk in his interview with "The Big Think Interview" argues, "The problem with trauma is that it starts when something happens to us, but that's not where it stops- it changes your brain. Once your brain changes and you're in constant fight or flight mode, it can be hard to stay focused, feel joy, or experience pleasure until this trauma is healed". Unfortunately, Seita does not get enough time to heal from his trauma.

This flashback has made Seita lose his rational thoughts. The news of Japan's surrender, the realization of his father's probable death, and Setsuko's death make him unconscious of his surroundings. As Matthew Tull also confesses "A flashback may be temporary and you maintain some connection with the present moment or you lose all awareness of what's going on around you, being taken completely back to your traumatic event." Though to some extent Seita can control his emotions and is aware of his surroundings, after Setsuko's death he completely loses his rationality or connection to reality. He suffers from dissociation where he disconnects himself from his surroundings. As Franny Nudelman rightly observes "Flashbacks are waking memories with the vivid and hallucinating properties of dreams; they produce an altered, trance- like state, during which current realities disappear and volition is suspended". It is clearly seen in the character of Srita that how he loses his connection with reality and drawn into a trance like state at the end of the movie. The flashback or the dream of the whole family taking a picture is the last nail in Seita's coffin. These dreams as Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* describe as the wishes of past which "have been abandoned, overlaid and repressed, and to which we have to attribute some sort of continued existence only because of their re-emergence in a dream. They are not dead in our sense of the word but only like the shades in the Odyssey, which awoke to some sort of life as soon as they had tasted blood" (282). These wishes of past to reunite with his family are not dead, these wishes haunt Seita more after the deaths of his family members till the very end. Though he has enough ration with him to survive and has the chance to start anew he cannot survive because his dissociation takes a toll on him.

Instead of being the symbol of hope, the fireflies become symbolic of the Japanese commoner's sufferings. From the beginning of the film, the firefly is tried to be shown as a symbol of something destructive that is why the audience sees the figure of the fireflies turning into the military aircraft that are throwing down bombs. Seita's question "Why do fireflies die so soon?" becomes a symbolic one and lets us question if it is the fireflies or the innocent people of Japan who are referred to here. The future generation of Japan who can have a bright future is dying too soon due to the unreasonable war. According to "Research Starters: Worldwide Deaths in World War II: WWII History" Japan saw 2,120,000 military deaths and 2,600,000-3,100,000 total civilian and military deaths. The life of Japanese people becomes even shorter than that of fireflies. That is why Setsuko's grave of fireflies reminds Seita as well as the audience of the mass improper funeral of their beloved people. The visuals of scattered burnt corpses beside the roads, and on the beach lying casually reminds the national horror that Japan had gone through during World War 2. It is not only the story of personal tragedy but also a national one. World War II gave Japan its most horrible nightmare.

Even though Setsuko is a child and cannot fathom with the situation fully suffers from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). The loss of family members, the flashbacks also drive her towards death. When the movie is coming to an end ill Setsuko sees her brother beaten for stealing vegetables from the garden; and that is the ultimate trauma that drives Setsuko to her fated end. Her jovial energy that is there in her loses its charm. She becomes silent and at the end unable to even wake up.

Claudia Catani in her "Mental Health of Children Living in War Zones: A Risk and Protection Perspective" says "Armed conflicts have a devastating impact on the mental health of affected populations. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression are the most common mental disorders in the aftermath of war for both adults and children, occurring in up to one third people directly exposed to traumatic war experiences." No doubt, Seita and Setsuko both are victims of depression as well as PTSD. After every happy moment, the sound of the aircraft triggers the trauma that they try to forget. The will to survive is lost when Setsuko sees her beaten brother caught by police; the uncertainty in her that whether she cannot see her brother anymore as her parents push her towards the depth of depression resulting in her death.

And for Seita, it is Setsuko's death. He can survive anything his parent's death though breaks him internally he can carry on living with Setsuko. But with Setsuko's death, the last hope of survival becomes blurry to Seita. Like many other war survivors, Seita also can go on living but he chooses death over life. Bessel van der Kolk in an interview with "The Big Think Interview" says that "... trauma isn't what happens to you, but how you respond to the traumatic situation. Something traumatic to one person may be no big deal to the next". In the case of Seita, he cannot come out from the shock of his sister's death. It is after the death of Setsuko that the audience realizes how deep the psychological wound of Seita is. It is not easy for him to endure. Seita loses all his hope as trauma "overwhelms its unfortunate victims and hurls them adrift in a raging sea of torment, helplessness, and despair" (Levine 17). The trauma, depression, anxiety, and dissociation leave him numb and he chooses to surrender himself in the lap of death. The bond between Seita and Setsuko is shown in a such beautiful way that audiences get emotionally attached to the characters. The emotional attachment causes the audience more pain as they can feel the pain of a helpless brother who is trying to save his little sister desperately. Akiyuki Nosaka's pain is vividly

picturized in the movie. It is as if Akiyuki wants to show her late sister how much he loves her and that he wants to die after her death. Not only Akiyuki but novelists, and poets like Hemingway, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens had used the personal experience of trauma to shape their writings. So, Akiyuki's trauma makes the film more relatable to the audiences.

We can also say that the characters in the film suffer from CPTSD (Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). CPTSD is a complex form of PTSD. Though PTSD is a result of one traumatic incident, CPTSD is the result of having a long traumatic experience. The victims of CPTSD cannot manage their emotions, they also have physical symptoms and sometimes they also have suicidal thoughts. According to the online article, "Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" by *Healthdirect* CPTSD occurs when "the event may have threatened their life or safety, or they may have witnessed a serious accident, death or natural disaster." No wonder in the film *Seita and Setsuko* have gone through a lot of traumatic experiences, Seita has seen his mother's dead body and he is traumatized by seeing the way her dead body is burnt in heap of charred bodies. They have been suffering from emotional damage after their mother's death, they also cannot tolerate the inhumane behaviour of their aunt, and it leads them to leave the haven of their aunt's house and they take refuge in an abandoned shelter in the mountain. They are never able to forget the traumatic events and it is shown repeatedly how much horrified they are when they see any plane in the sky or get scared after hearing the sound of sirens.

They try many times to forget about their real situation. They also try to disconnect themselves from reality and are indulged in themselves. But their efforts are not enough as their mental, as well as physical condition, get worsen. Seita's only hopes and waits for his father's return from the war. But, at the end of the film, he comes to know his father will never return like many Japanese soldiers. According to *Wikipedia* Japanese ships were sunk by the U.S in raids and 300,386 officers and men were died. Flashbacks are something that plays a major role in the lives of Seita and Setsuko. Seita always dreams of his glorious days of Japanese navy. This dreams are something that play a huge role in the film. Sigmund Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* talks about how dream reveal the psychological structure of human beings and it is associated with the psychic activities when a person is in waking state. Here also the dreams about Seita's father portrays his psychological needs for his father's presence and how unconsciously he hopes for his father's return. But all the dreams are shattered at the end when Seita comes to know from a stranger that Japan has surrendered and all the Japanese ships are sunk by the American army. Japan had surrendered on 15th August, 1945. Japan's relationship with its history is not pleasant, "memories of loss haunted post-war society" (Igarashi 12). It is not only a national tragedy but also a personal one as Seita loses his last hope to retrieve his family. Although the war is ended, his father will never return. Seita is actually a representation of those orphans who lost their parents to war and left alone to survive. Seita and Setsuko's journey shows the life of orphans during the World War II. In an interview with "Young Post", Kisako Motoki, a war survive talks how during World War II the orphans were neglected most, she also talks about how they didn't have any power to protest as they were children at that time. The clear picture is seen when Motoki says, "They abandoned us and acted as if we never existed". In the film too, the audience can see that Setsuko doesn't get a proper treatment in the when Seita takes her to the clinic. The Japanese government at that time never thought once about the physical and psychological needs of orphans.

Though Seita and Setsuko never try to attempt suicide, their psychological damage causes their biggest injury and Setsuko eventually loses her hunger after Setsuko's death Seita's refusal of taking food indicates that he has intentionally welcome death. The death of Seita reflects how much Akiyuki wants to die after his own sister's death. Akiyuki was himself a teenager when he lost his sister. And somehow he feels responsible for not able to save her dying sister. Frank Bodman while talking about the children of early adolescents after war confirms that they "felt the sense of responsibility for the younger once".

As the film is shown in flashbacks it is after the death of Setsuko that the readers come to know what Seita and Setsuko usually ate during their time in the shelter. As a child when she is left alone in a shelter she ate fake food made of mud. Although it is not clear in the film it can be said Setsuko has suffered from dissociation. Maybe it is because of the hunger and after eating the frog guts for days that she has lost her rationality and mixed reality with imagination. Her weak body was not able to take any more psychological stress than this and this is why when she sees her brother being beaten badly for stealing vegetables from someone's yard, her survival instincts die at that moment. Though Seita is older and physically stronger than Setsuko, the loss that he has suffered becomes a heavy burden on his life and he welcomes death at the end.

Again the fireflies associate themselves with forgotten dreams and recurrent tragedies. In the dirty shelter, Seita sees the lights of fireflies and the glorious days of the Japanese navy, He thinks of his father and lives in a hope that Japan one day will win the war. Japan never wants to be under the control of America and wants to become a colonizer itself, so patriotism takes a bigger deal in the minds of every Japanese. We also can say that the national tragedy, of Japan's surrender after a long war, also plays a major part in Seita's emotional damage. He realizes like the dreams of Japan his father is also dead. Before the last breath of Seita, he saw his happy family for the last time in flashback. The happy memories which should play a part to enhance positivity reverse their role and causes depression in Seita's mind because he knows he cannot go back to the way it once was. The happy memories left a bigger scar in his mind that he cannot cope with.

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