



ANALYZING DELAYED TRAUMATIC REACTIONS IN STEPHEN KING'S *GERALD'S GAME: A FREUDIAN PERSPECTIVE*

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ABSTRACT



Trauma is the result of the unique personal experience of an unusual event i.e., violence, harassment, dehumanization, psychological abuse etc., something that the individual was not ready for, something that not only invaded one's sense of security and safety but also makes him/her feel helpless and alienated. Essentially, past trauma and traumatic memories affect an individual's external reality along with his internal reality. The consequences of traumatic experience have been problematic both within the psychiatry and psychoanalysis. The authors like D.H Lawrence, Stephen King, Andrea Kleine, Lidia Yuknavitch Roxane Gay, etc., attempt to bridge the gap between psychiatry and literary writing through the portrayal of psychical trauma in their writings. In *Gerald's Game*, King depicted a woman named Jessia Burlingame who faced sexual violence in her childhood. This atrocious incident leaves behind some sort of "mnemic trace", which she repressed in her psyche. Later, that 'repressed memory' got triggered when her husband, Gerald tried to cage her in conventional women's role. As a result, this 'repressed memory' becomes traumatic in retroactive frame, which deeply troubled her in the womanhood, as discussed in psychic traumatic theory (*Nachträglichkeit*) of the French psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud.

The present paper focuses primarily on the mechanism of delayed traumatic reaction of psychic trauma depicted in Stephen King's psychological novel *Gerald's Game*. It also aims to throw light on how a repressed memory of the heinous past, becomes an obstacle in one's development as a human.

Keywords: *Psychic Trauma, Nachträglichkeit, Sexual Violence, Psychoanalysis, Memory etc.*

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INTRODUCTION

Psychic trauma can be understood as a psychologically upsetting experience that produces an emotional, spiritual or mental disorder, which results in long-lasting negative effects on an individual's perception, emotions, and behavior. Psychic trauma was not given much attention until 1980, neither in psychology nor in literature. However, through interdisciplinary discourse, the theory of trauma currently occupies a central position. In 1992, when *Gerald's Game* was published, the social discourses on the interconnection between Child Sexual Abuse and Memory Restoration, especially in case of women became unexceptional and accepted socially. Over time, memory restoration becomes traumatic in the retroactive frame, which deeply troubled them in their womanhood. Women's mass recovery of child sexual abuse memories that occurred in the 1990s needs to be read in a close connection with Second-Wave feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash: the Undeclared War against American Women* illustrates the different strategies by which American society and media actively undermined all the achievements of women through the 'Women's Liberation Movement', during the 1980s and until the end of the 1990s. Faludi emphasizes on a "*Backlash Psychology*", which highlights the effect of the entire pop-psychology branch. The effect of the unavoidable byproduct of pop-psychology that had evolved since the early 1980s came to fruition in official proposals for new "feminine" disorders to be inserted into the professional *Mental Disorders Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)*, the main reference text of American psychiatry. It is also said that every generation forms its own demonstration of trans-cultural identity. (Mishra & Mishra, 2018) Psychological trauma often involves an interaction between the 'external' as well as the individual's 'internal' world. One cannot conceive the trauma solely based on an external event, no matter how violent the event was. The personal baggage underlying in his unconscious mind also works implicitly, which leads to psychological trauma. The theory of psychological trauma involves a persistent,

oscillating interaction between the external as well as the internal world or, more accurately, what is known as the painful resulting outcome of direct interaction between the external facts and how they are perceived psychologically. The psychological reception of trauma results in many possibilities either that atrocious incident makes the individual's present dreadful or it would give birth to the psychological problem of *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*. PTSD is a mental disorder with symptoms like flashbacks, panic attacks, nightmares, hysteria, anxiety, undesirable thoughts, blurred memory, lack of interest in activities, anger outburst, hallucination, hyperarousal (**fight-or-flight** response) etc. In 1980, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association, 1980)* included *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)* as a new diagnostic category. The PTSD's DSM diagnosis described acute symptoms following

"combat experiences, rape, domestic violence, and child abuse; these symptoms were then categorized along four clusters: intrusive reexperiencing, avoidance, hyperarousal, and hypervigilance, with general symptoms of anxiety and dysphoria in addition" (Ford & Courtois).

Feminism is a critical social movement that challenges, and ultimately aims to breakdown, the patriarchal structures of a society. It means different things to different people at different times and has many overlaps, for example the suffrage movement and right to inheritance have been central themes at different times. (Mishra, 2018) Since then literature has presented feminism in multiple perspectives and explored the complex world of women, their anxiety, pain and sufferings. (Prakash & Mishra, 2015) Stephan King primarily examines the social, psychological, and emotional interior landscape of women through the character of Jessie. A PTSD sufferer often tries to keep their past trauma buried and sometimes as a result develop Amnesia. Similarly, Jessie's past trauma is kept buried until she is prompted by continuous intrusive thoughts. The recurring thoughts that Jessie has, are the main facet



of PTSD, where she knows she needs to remember something but she can't actually remember what it is. The heinous act happened in her past caused new and unexpected effects in her present. Freud explained the mechanism of "belated response or understanding" of earlier traumatic event, in his unpublished book "A Project for a Scientific Psychology" by developing his concept of *Nachträglichkeit*.

NACHTRÄGLICHKEIT: A FREUDIAN STUDY OF GERALD'S GAME

Neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, a French physician who worked on traumatized women at the Salpêtrière hospital, pioneered the investigation on the relationship between trauma and mental illness. During the late 19th century, the primary focus of Charcot's study was *Hysteria*, a disorder commonly diagnosed in women, which later influenced French psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. In 1896, Freud along with Pierre Janet (student of Charcot) have termed traumatic dissociation as

"hypnoid hysteria" and suggested that "a precocious experience of sexual relations . . . resulting from sexual abuse committed by another person . . . is the specific cause of hysteria . . . not merely an agent provocateur" (Weisaeth 54).

They both accepted that intolerable reactions towards traumatic experiences (i.e., sexual assault) in premature ages resulted in a transformed state of consciousness which Janet termed "dissociation". Although, Freud eventually moved from his "seduction theory" to "conflict theory", implying that it was not past trauma experiences that triggered delusional symptoms, but rather the undesirable existence of sexual and destructive desires. Later, Freud found that each hysterical symptom was linked to psychological trauma that resurrects the prior traumatic event. He introduced the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* at this stage to clarify the symptom forming process in patients. He subsequently developed his (both) theories of Psychological Trauma and Hysteria, primarily in two articles on the "Neuro-Psychoses of Defence".

Nachträglichkeit is the central approach to psychoanalytical understanding of trauma, which is deeply intertwined with Freud's study of Hysteria. *Nachträglichkeit* has not received much attention in the field of trauma due to its inconsistent and problematic translation as "deferred action", "après-coup", "afterwardsness", "retroactive temporality", "belatedness", "latency" and "retrospective attribution". Freud in his psychoanalytical concept of "afterwardsness" stated that psychic trauma constitutes of two etiological events instead of one. Although, the importance of real event is lesser than that of the second event, which means 'what had happened' is not important rather the way a person reacted towards that experience determines the effect of traumatic encounter. Similarly, traumatic encounter has been accentuated in *The Gerald's Game* by Stephen King through the portrayal of Jessie.

Jessie Mahout Burlingame's depiction was same as of the traumatic women in 1980s, who were repressing their trauma in order to preserve the sacredness of their family. She buried her childhood sexual abuse memory deep in her sub-conscious mind, which not only wreck her teen years but also her marriage. In conformity with Freud's theory of Trauma, Jessie at the beginning of the novel has lost a lot of her interest in the bondage games. The extensive study of the female character helps us to know the way the females were exploited in the day to day life. Through the study the psychological shifts that the female characters had to face was vividly observed. (Dutta, 2019) She explained her incompetence, for not fulfilling Gerald's rape fantasy as "what my father did to me then might have something to do with what's happening to me now" (King 280). Freud discussed that the production of second memory is predetermined, through various associations. In that instance, Jessie's second memory was revealed when Gerald grinned during their bondage session, which "had reminded her of her father's smile" (King 2).

Freud illustrated the inevitable components of the whole mechanism of his concept, that are "(1) the two distinct etiological moments in time, (2)

separated by time lag, (3) in which first scene initially remains without consequences, (4) but is transformed by the succeeding one, and (5) becomes traumatic in retroactive fashion". Diagrammatically,

the working of psychic trauma is depicted in Figure 1, as per Bistoen, Vanheule & Craps:



Figure 1: The working of *Nachträglichkeit*

T1 denotes actual traumatic experience

T2 denotes moment when traumatic event is understood

→ denotes time gap

Σ denotes traumatic symptoms

In other words, *Nachträglichkeit* states that the effects of the actual traumatic experience T1 can be delayed by several years which become traumatic until its revival at T2. With reference to Jessie, T1 consists of the atrocious incident (i.e., rape) happened on the day of the solar eclipse that was actually committed by her own father Tom Mahout.

"She shivers and tells him it's creepy; he tells her to try not to be too scared to enjoy it, a statement she will examine carefully, perhaps- for double meaning years later (King 286)."

T2 indicates the time period in which she understood her odious past encounter, which happened to her at the age of ten. Jessie's T2 refers to Gerald's *grin (King 2)*, *handcuffs (King 2)* and *unremarkable erection (King 4)*, that was followed up by her "*Panic attacks*".

Even thirty years after her traumatic experience, she is impotent to overcome the consequences of "*her father's sexual advances*" (King 283). T2 can only be understood retroactively as 'there is no way of predicting which experience will be traumatogenic to whom'. Freud foregrounded that the experience was not originally traumatic rather it was the memory and said: "*memory is reprinted, so to speak, in accordance with later experience*". He further explained that '*memory*' becomes traumatic at point T2 because puberty brings the new meaning and understanding of the scene T1, which causes new and unexpected repercussions in the present. Having been married to Gerald for 17 years, role plays were not new for Jessie but the very imagery of Gerald tyrannically bounding her triggers her traumatic memory:



"his soft, short fingered hand, its flesh as pink as that which capped his penis- reached out and grasped her breast and something inside her suddenly popped like an overstrained tendon" (King 7).

Here, the past memory of "hard part of him(father)" (King 284) against her bottom got triggered and become traumatic in retroactive frame. Thus, the revival of the actual scene "aroused what it was certainly not able at the time, a sexual release, which was transformed into anxiety" (Freud 354).

Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, apprises that the memory repressed at point T1 becomes "explosive through retroactive investment at T2." He further explained how psychic trauma constituted by repressing the memory. The only least important component that reached Jessica consciousness was her father's touch. Therefore, the actual incident of molestation was substituted by some signifier, in order to create adverse effects on her. Accordingly, the sexual fervor is closely linked with the memory of past sexual abuse rather than sexual abuse itself. Freud put forward his astonishing idea and explained:

"The case of a memory arousing an effect which it did not arouse as an experience because in the meantime the change [brought about] in puberty had made possible a different understanding of what was remembered." (Freud 356).

Freud was incompetent to explain why memory becomes more traumatic than actual event? This was later explained by Jacques Lacan, in his percept, this happens because at the time when the sexual abuse occurred the victim was unable to understand the event fully, due to his/her lack of symbolic understanding/ knowledge. The event leaves behind some "mnemonic traces", which are engraved in the psychic by the means of 'symbols', which lays there as sleeper cells. The precocious sexual act committed against Jessica was understood by her many years later and with each passing year, it becomes more and more traumatic. There was a space for memories, introspection, retrospection,

foreshadowing, flashback, and horrible experiences in her conscious that is tainted by discomfort, wound and trauma.

Through the bondage game session, Jessie receives access to the traumatic truth of her precocious sexual experience for the very first time. Therefore, the actual past experience is lived with a new subjective reality. Cathy Caruth called T1 event 'unclaimed experience' because it was "not subjectively experienced at the time of its occurrence." So, at the bondage game session, both actual event (T1) and role play (T2) happen concurrently. Precisely at that moment of bondage session, she drew a conclusion of the actual past event and came to realization of truth, which produce the traumatic impact on her. Even though, her memory of precocious sexual experience is inaccessible and opaque, still functions as the point of origin for all subsequent traumatic pathologies like PTSD, panic attacks, intrusive thoughts, hysteria etc. *She had always heard voices inside her head (King 3).* As the consequences of her emotional turmoil, she started hearing those voices *after that dark day (King 33).* The wicked memories of her childhood bedeviled not only her college years but also made her marriage meaningless. Throughout her life, she was chained in her past memory because her father unabatedly snatched away her adolescence years by committing precocious sexual act against her. At the age of 10, Jessie was unprepared for the sexual intercourse which caused subjective pathology. The psychoanalytical theory emphasizes the psychic trauma by blurring the boundaries between normality and traumatic symptoms.

With reference to Jessie, there are three possible consequences of her repressed memory- PTSD, fear of being trapped and repeating the past. All PTSD outlets can be seen in the case of Jessie:

She awoke from them (nightmares) sweaty and gasping, her hands thrust deeply into the fork of her crotch and rolled into tight little balls. She only remembered one of these dreams, and that memory was distant, blurred: she had been playing croquet



without any clothes on, and all at once the sun had gone out. (King 8,9).

Here, 'sunhad gone out' acts as a signifier associated with T1 event, solar eclipse which she was watching at the age of ten actually symbolizes the evil context of her past. Glen Weldon described the relevance of eclipses as "a signal to audiences that the normal rules have temporarily lifted, and things are about to get weird." Subsequently in the novel, when she saw "a man in the corner" (King 153), which her intrusive voices justified as "the man you see in the corner is combination of shadows and imagination- no more than that" (King 154), but "she could not quite convince herself that it was all imagination" (King 154). Most of the novel transpired in Jessie's head either in terms of internal monologue or hallucinate voices, which actually revealing the different parts of her fragmented personality. *We're all you. You do know that, don't you? (King 320).*

Sense of belongingness to one's root comes from parents which alone stand out as a fact why Jessie even when ravished by her father clings to him for reconciliation. Amid her dilemma of her father's simpropriated intention towards her, this sense of rootedness presses her to obliterate his offensive sexual advances. During her "mental emptiness and the total physical incapacity" (King 152) when she saw "Boogeymonster" (King 155) she perplexed him with her "Space cowboy- Monster of love" (her father). Jessie wants someone who can protect her from the evils of the world and her only hope was her father. But he turns out to be the biggest monster of her life. Her father's grin had left its marks on her latent mind as a painful memory which got triggered both in case of Gerald and Boogeyman. When boogeyman grins at Jessie: "there was something horribly familiar about that grin...which had borne this assault with remarkable strength" (King 160). There also she recalled her father. *Daddy? Daddy, is that you? (King 160).* Michel de Certeau points out that the past repeats itself as meaningless virtuosity until, in accordance with the present, analogously to the free associations of a patient under analysis, it reveals itself as "truth"; a temporality of the afterwardsness, whose senses we

had previously elucidated.' Jessie craved for fatherly love all her life, as a result she unknowingly married to a man who was much similar to her father – much older than her, lawyer and abusive. She was exploited by her father throughout her life later same pattern was followed by her husband, which made her psychologically trapped. Jessie's exploitative image of "being damsel in distress" gave rise to her fear of being trapped, as a consequence she killed her husband in her fight-respond to her trauma. *Cosmo Girl Jessie Burlingame says 'No man chains me down' (King 36)"*

Jessie was miserably trapped in the labyrinth of her past, which has made her life dreadful by cross-cutting between her present and childhood. In order to break her past labyrinth, she "have to remember, too. I think it's the only chance you have to get free. You can't run away anymore, Jessie. You have to turn and face the truth." (King 280). She was at that extremity of life, where she has to decide whether she wants to die mourning her past or fight a battle to end her victimization cycle. Subsequently, she realizes that it's "time to quit bitching and moaning and get down to business." Three months later, in court trials, she confronted Raymond Andrew Joubert (boogey man) who is one of her traumatic signifiers. She perceives the fact that "no eclipse lasts forever." (King 413).

CONCLUSION

It took years to fully discern the novel *Gerald's Game* transcribed by Stephen King which has numerous intricate implications towards vandalizing mental forces. These forces then turn their head up in recognition when triggered by Gerald, to break a sexual stagnation in their marriage. Though written as a gothic novel, King gave us an apparition to understand Jessie's indecision and mental games which she was bound to traverse to fully recognize the hidden repression in her mind that makes her a traumatic victim of the situation. It has been rightly remarked that, the surest way to corrupt a youth is to instruct one to hold in higher esteem those who think alike than those who think differently. (Joshi, 2019) The reason for her traumatized state was well acquainted to the readers, but in the very end of her



hallucination, till that time she had surpassed all the dreadful memories which sprung up in her memory lane. Owing to the very incident of sexual harassment by her father, Jessie was caught up in a web of self-defiance, where she deliberately viewed her father's reflection in the conscious imagery of her husband. Then in the wake of becoming a perfect trophy wife to her husband, she lost touch from her inner conscience and kept doing it till she was forced to face the abhorrent situation of sexual role play. This revoked in her, years old repressed emotional turmoil that was shut closed by even her own mother, making it even more heinous for her to face. Her past trauma is manifested in her lack of desire for career, children or any other intimate, ongoing relationship. The authoritatively compelling implications of Gerald and the Moon man trigger her defense mechanism, which ultimately leads her to a journey of retrospective introspection, going through which, she was able to face her traumatic memories and reflect on her inner psychological repression.

The psychoanalytical concept of "*Nachträglichkeit*" translated as *afterwardsness*, highlights the relationship between her atrocious past and present trauma that evokes some ethical as well as psychic problems like PTSD and hysteria. The possibilities of developing PTSD depend on the category of incident involved, some incidents (such as sexual assault, rape etc.) cause the disorder more often than others (Jessie's car accident), which suggests that there is something '*traumogenic*' inherent to those occurrences, which leaves behind some sort of the "*mnemonic trace*" on her mind. These traces don't affect the present living but rather becomes intrusive thoughts with passing time, which can be clearly seen in the case of Jessie. The most prominent symbol that left it's traced on her sub-conscious mind was her father's grin.

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