

Silencing the Past: The Politics of Voice and Representation in Trauma Literature by Women

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Abstract

The present article has explored the different challenges the women in the century faced, the society was still essentially patriarchal and had strict gender roles. The research has shown how these female writers have presented the issues faced by women in such a male-dominated society. The act of writing itself is their attempt at breaking free from the traditional expectations of women, through their novels the novelists have empowered many others. While there have been many different feminist writers throughout history, the study has essentially focused on Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, George Elliot and Jhumpa Lahiri. The writings of these novelists addressed problems with gender roles in both the public and domestic spheres.

Keywords: *Trauma, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, society, inequality, gender, stigma*

Introduction

Since ancient times women have been marginalised and cast in literary works as pawns and scapegoats, attempts have been made to wipe them from existence entirely. The individual experience of trauma often gets lost, as a result, analysing the novels from female writers helps in understanding how the narrative voice is used through fiction to represent the impact of trauma. Feminist theories on trauma have suggested that certain kinds of trauma are institutionalised within society to discriminate against women and maintain social hierarchies. The lives of women are constructed with multiple intersection systems of oppression, to understand the trauma that women often go through it is important to understand that the concept of oppression is not binary but rather a combination of different interwoven systems (Carastathis, 2014). Novels and other literary works written by men are not always able to capture these problems as they have become institutionalised within society, therefore novels published by female writers are integral towards interpreting the problems.

Women have been silenced for generations, and trauma literature has helped these women to share their stories and lived experiences through fictional characters. With these stories of trauma and the ways men in society abuse women have been exposed, the stories of different women writers who have used third-person narrative to showcase their stories inspire and contribute to breaking down the stigma surrounding trauma (Bishop, 2022). The concept of trauma is often complex and the way it is interpreted by survivors also varies, therefore there is a need to adopt different social and cultural parameters to conceptualise these problems. The present research brings out the way trauma has been handled by female writers through generations by observing the works of *Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte, George Elliot and Jhumpa Lahiri*.

Trauma in Women's Writing

One particular aspect of the trauma theory is the impact male domestic violence has on women, Jane Austen did not care much for allegorical stories and focused on writing stories that are realistic and had families which are flawed. The novels of Austen are popular for their witty dialogues and relationships which are memorable for the ages, and although they do not directly depict physical abuse, they do suggest the practice of manipulation and existing domestic violence in the life of the characters (Matheny, 2022). While family-related trauma has been focused on within the works of Austen, the other forms of trauma have also been discussed within the research, in the novel "Persuasion", critics often brand the character of Mary Musgrove as a flat character, however, the reason for her emotional unavailability is due to the unprocessed trauma of her mother's death. The character is seen to be constantly projecting and repressing her feelings due to her lonely life (Olsson Hagman, 2020).

While the concept of trauma can be seen in "Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park and Persuasion", Austen has differentiated trauma into two types, these are trauma experienced during childhood years of the heroines or trauma that took place during adulthood. In the novel "Persuasion", the character of Anne Elliot fails to process

her grief and rejects the support and agency provided by her family due to which she falls into grief and silence. Losing her mother at an early age led to her moulding herself in her mother's shoes, leading her to lose the love of her life, Captain Wentworth, the consequences of her traumatic past are reflected throughout the novel. The act of silencing women is seen through the social practices relevant to Victorian England (Kamal, 2018). The patriarchal social construct prevented women from owning properties, leading to girls being displaced from their homes.

Charlotte Bronte had witnessed the death of her mother and the emotional withdrawal of her father, these pushed her towards melancholy, the primary theme in her works. The novels of Bronte deal with individual conflicts, which are visual representations of her suffering (Hoeveler, 2006). In "Villette" both Dora and Lucy Snowe experience trauma, throughout the novel Lucy is seen implementing various strategies that can help in curing her trauma. The author is careful to not reveal the exact traumas that the characters have faced as they have themselves suppressed these feelings. Lucy constantly imagines her traumas as women who represent different aspects of her life or personality, her mental psyche and problems faced as a trauma victim are highlighted within the novel (Brokaw, 2011). The concept of characters creating doubles of themselves is not something new to Freud, by unleashing her traumas Lucy can observe and criticise the characters and thereby reflect on herself.

Both Charlotte and Emily Bronte had elevated themselves through their writings, the novels show social beliefs and practices that contributed to the oppression of women. Both of these authors have presented careful perspectives on female psychology. Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights" deals with maternal loss and relationships which are abusive, on the other hand in "Jane Eyre" of Charlotte Bronte, her anxieties in the context of mental health, and marriage have been shown in detail. The character of Jane Eyre has experienced death and abuse in her life during her early age, Madeleine Wood remarks that characters such as Jane can never achieve true happiness in romantic relationships because of her troubled childhood (Matheny, 2022). Bronte has carefully shown the Victorian perception of trauma and how the childhood trauma of Jane has manifested in her relationship with Mr. Rochester. Every hopeful change that Jane tries to grasp within the novel turns into further trauma and abuse. In the end, the forgiveness nature of Jane Eyre is also consistent with Victorian ideals. The Victorian perspective is deeply rooted in Christian theology and philosophy, and the expectations of women to be forgiving have been demonstrated clearly within the novel.

Similar to how the death of their mother has affected the writings of Charlotte Bronte, it has also inspired Emily Bronte to create characters that are emotionally detached, melancholic and even hysteric in certain contexts. In the novel, both Catherine and Heathcliff have Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) while also suffering from personality disorders. After the death of her father, the experience of Catherine in Wuthering Heights has been severely traumatic, these problems have resulted in the development of bizarre bodily symptoms that can be branded as hysteria by Freud. The childhood memories of Catherine continue to haunt her as it increases her anxieties. The unfulfilled love of Heathcliff is responsible for his trauma and drives him towards taking revenge against Catherine for her marriage to Edgar (Asl, 2014). Following the incidents Catherine completely alienates herself from the outside world as she processes the problems caused due to her abandonment. In the final acts of the novel, the hysteria faced by Catherine is seen to strike Heathcliff too, as he falls into melancholy and becomes an alien and outcast, ultimately dying at the end of the novel.

The writings of George Eliot have a long history of trauma, the family that she comes from would be considered dysfunctional in the modern context. Biographies on George Eliot highlight the shaky relationships which the author had with others in her family. The works often depict scenes of loss and trauma because it was her way of processing and healing from her trauma (O'Connor, 1996). The novel "The Mill on the Floss" is one such novel where this trauma is elaborated in detail. The content of the novel revolves around a young girl named Maggie Tulliver, throughout the novel the girl is seen to go through a great deal of opposition and mental trauma. George Eliot was a devoted evangelicalism, the researcher suggests that the obsessive-compulsive behaviour that is seen in her works is an example of family dysfunction. Showcasing gender-based trauma is nothing new for Jhumpa Lahiri, the stories that are represented by Lahiri deal with immense trauma and the potential success or failure of the female subjects (Bahmanpour, 2010). While her work deals with trauma, she provides her characters with hope at the end and relieves them from the vicious cycle, an example of this can be found in her work "This Blessed House."

Voice and Representation of Trauma in Literature by Women

The novels of Jane Austen have a significant impact on modern literature as through the creation of complex characters Austen has explored the themes of trauma and the voice of women. The novel "Persuasion" shows the dominance of patriarchal thoughts and ideas within society, however, it also shows the rise of a new narrative idea that defies both the

specular and textual context of the word I. The same can be seen in Austen's "Emma" where the protagonist undergoes a certain level of self-consciousness, in the beginning of the novel Emma has not only been an empty canvas. Through the character of Emma, Austen has presented a commentary on the 18th-century society in England (Middleton, 1993). The female voices in these novels have embodied metaphors to provide social behaviour and characterization of society. The realization that Emma undergoes puts into perspective how the new voice has always been her but she was only able to access it Box Hill. Similarly, the voice of Anne in "Persuasion" is seen to inspire the masculine inscriptions of Wentworth. Female novelists such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte have focused on the interior thought process of the characters and the problems that they face. Researchers have argued that the silence of the characters is due to their fear of terror and physical assault (Blundell, 2009). The writing of Jane Austen has shown the inwardness of the female listeners in a conventional set-up. The silence of these female characters should not be interpreted as passivity or submission but rather as an enlightened presence.

In Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre," the author makes use of a first-person narrative to vividly show the characteristics and personalities of the characters. In many cases when a person goes through trauma, they are unable to process it and lose the ability to explain the incident in detail. However, as Bronte presents a first-person narrative, she can provide the characters with a voice and deal with the consequences of serious trauma (Bishop, 2022). In the novel, the act of Jane retaining her chastity is not her holding on to her virtue but rather it is the costly psychological struggle that the character goes through. In "Jane Eyre" the idea of colonized females is a metaphor which shows the liberal views of the author (Green, 2012). Study shows that Bronte has made use of the gothic tradition to represent the gender-based violence that the characters face at the hands of their loved ones. As it has been established within the research, "Jane Eyre" is almost autobiographical to Bronte's own experience, the scenes of boarding schools show the violence of the powerful men in the society and the amount of control they have over the school girls in the boarding school (Trimingham Jack, 2022). The mental health of men and women was prioritized in Victorian society, like many other women Bronte also had many unprocessed emotions, through the novel she was able to express the anger that she has gone through in real life.

The idea of trauma has been defined as a voice that can be heard but known fully, "Wuthering Heights" has presented an elaborate narrative structure that is seen to constantly shift between past and present events. The character of Nelly is the primary narrator of the novel, his narration of the traumas experienced by Catherine and Heathcliff can be seen as an attempt to suffocate the sufferings. Throughout the novel, the troubled minds of the two protagonists are shown in detail to show the complexities of human nature. The gothic nature of the novel to represent trauma can again be seen through the character of Lockwood. When he spends one night at Heathcliff's house and is faced by Catherine's ghost. Bronte has carefully used Romantic ideas within a Victorian framework (González Díaz, 1848). The impact which trauma can have on both mental and physical health can be seen through the characters of Catherine. Even in their trauma, the twisted and peculiar love story of Catherine and Heathcliff continues to impact people and attracts readers. The character of Catherine is constructed based on Emily's ideas and beliefs about romanticism, the cationic behaviour of Catherine at the end of her life is an example of her trauma.

George Elliot over the years has been criticised for her renunciation, the novel "The Mill on the Floss" is a holistic story on the story of a little girl named Maggie who has undergone gross discrimination right from her childhood. In the novel when Maggie is seen to elope with Stephen, Stephen is not criticised for their unconventional behaviour in traditional London society (YADAV & YADAV, 2016). Elliot has tried to show how society places boys on a pedestal while women are crucified for the same crimes committed as their male counterparts. People are seen to be shocked by Maggie's actions as she elopes and gets back without marrying Stephen. In "This Blessed House" the newlywed four-month-old couple Sanjeev and Twinkle, as they start to unpack their belongings, they discover little Christian artefacts around the house. Despite the lack of support from Sanjeev in keeping these Christian religious objects, Twinkle insists and the couple realizes the lack of chemistry between them (Bindhu, 2014).

Gendered Experience of Trauma

Austen through her works has been critical towards the social practices and beliefs of the people in London, in "Pride and Prejudice", the author used the term angel to raise suspicion on Bingley, later in the novel his view on women and unrealistic gender expectations has been presented. In these novels written by female writers, it is almost impossible for the characters to experience a marriage that is not shrouded in stigma and illegitimacy. While "Persuasion and Northanger Abbey" were published at the same time, it is believed that "Northern Abbey" was written at a much earlier period and therefore successfully shows the different views of the novelist on the concept of gender (Green, 2019). The

works of Austen have been written from a historical perspective as it shows the scandals, and prostitution which were common during that era in London. Austen does not blame the women however, she rather shows the justice system of the country did little to stop prostitution. Rape was quite common during this period but due to lack of legislation, the rapists often escaped without guilt (Jasna, 2016). The novel "Emma" addresses these problems by showing the silencing of women, the novel shows how women continue to lack power and suffer in silence. The novels of Austen show that men possess all power in society and the capability they have in silencing the women, the rationalistic nature of Emma saves her from her doom at the end of the novel.

Charlotte Bronte in her works has provided attention to the different problems which women faced during the Victorian era, the upper and middle-class women of the time were often not allowed into the commercial and intellectual world. The mindset which people had about women was challenged by Bronte, this period was marked by social and political reforms and the women sought the equal rights that were experienced by men. The ideal Victorian woman was required to stay within the domestic boundaries since women were considered a bad investment, and parents neglected their education (Дарвишова, 2021). Through her characterization, Bronte addresses these traditional beliefs and the imagination of society (Talijančić, 2014). The gender-based and female responsibilities that women had to undergo in the Victorian era are shown by Bronte to show the frustration which the novelist had with society. The strong position of women and their contribution to providing men with spiritual and moral guides has been depicted in "Jane Eyre", the character of Jane belongs to the lower classes (Karim). The duality between Jane Eyre and her ambition to be successful is highlighted as she questions the idea of getting married. The novel depicts men with extremely masculine energy as was common during the Victorian era, the novel "Jane Eyre" can be considered as a feminist novel.

Feminist inspirations can be found in Emily Bronte's "Wuthering Heights" as the novel challenges gender roles through the character of Catherine. The main female characters of the novel "Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Linton and Isabella Linton" are all strong powerful female characters that showcase their potential in different ways while still living in a society that is patriarchal. The novelist has challenged conventional love stories, both Catherine Earnshaw and Isabella Linton defy societal beliefs and practices, in the early ages the rebellious side of both the characters is seen as Catherine and Heathcliff make a promise to grow up as rude savages. Catherine Earnshaw shows the destructive side of society against the female nature. After her marriage, however, she becomes a prisoner in her own house and this contributes towards her trauma which eventually leads to her death (Sindradóttir, 2015). Edgar denies the freedom of Catherine as it was common for the time. Marriage is a representation of the social oppression that women faced through marriage and the lack of legal rights of women in the nineteenth century.

Right from the first chapter of the novel, the story highlights the difference in treatment that she received compared to her brother. Her brother is seen to be sent to a school by Mr Tulliver, to become an engineer. Elliot closely relates to and understands the problems that the little girl has gone through, as she writes "Maggie was living through, over and over again, the agony of the moment in which she had rushed" (O'Connor, 1996). The gender-based discrimination that existed in Victorian society has been greatly highlighted through the works of Elliot. The clash between Sanjeev and Twinkle shows that both immigrants and non-immigrants suffer from clashes and the worlds that they belong to. The struggle of the immigrant against the dominant control of the new region is effectively shown by Lahiri. Even though both belong to the same religion and country, they have huge differences and disparities between them which continue to create issues for their newly fangled culture (Bindhu, 2014).

Conclusion

As concluding remarks for the present research, it can be seen how women's voices have constantly been subdued within society. The research presents a detailed picture of the trauma that women go through from a female perspective. The study chose the works of Jane Austen, Charlotte and Emily Bronte, George Elliot and Jhumpa Lahiri to provide a detailed understanding of the perspective of these women on the social issues present during the Victorian era. All three of the novelists have addressed the societal issues in their own ways, from the problems with prostitution in the streets of London to the lack of legal support that women had in owning marriage or in their marriage.

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