



Life After Being Raped: Trauma And Its Consequences

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ABSTRACT

Most of the people related to literature are certainly aware of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). Though the poet used many allusions, one of the allusions, the myth of Philomela, applied in the second section of the poem, "A Game of Chess," is very important for the present paper. In this myth, Philomela, a figure in Greek mythology, gets raped by her brother-in-law, Tereus, and eventually gets her tongue cut off in order to remain silent about the incident. Sexual violence against women is not new and it repeats itself again and again. Life after being raped is accompanied by trauma, identity crisis, shame, and guilt. This paper wants to examine various impact of trauma on the victims of sexual abuse especially rape. As one person is different from the other, the effect of trauma also differs across people. Life of a raped victim is not easy. It is very difficult to find the whole self, re-establish the self-identity, trust, and control again. The impact of trauma can be positive as well as negative. While some survivors achieve mental strength after recovering from the difficult situation, others may lose interest in life and feel worthless. This paper uses concepts from Feminist Theory and Trauma Theory, to examine the context of sexual violence against women, and the aftermath of violence especially how trauma affects the victims.

Keywords: Myth of Philomela, Rape, Feminist Theory, and Trauma.

Introduction

Above the antique mantel was displayed As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale Filled all the desert with inviolable voice And still she cried, and still the world pursues, 'Jug Jug' to dirty ears. (Eliot)

One cannot live in the present neglecting the past. The interrelationship between past and present always remains active in the mind of the people. This is also applicable for the present paper. Sexual violence especially rape continues to exist and haunt the society from the time immemorial. Newspaper reports and media are flooded with rape news everyday. Every single day a girl or a woman gets raped. It is a pandemic that spreads all over the world, and it seems that no recovery is possible from this pandemic.

In the myth of Philomela, her physical injury cannot prevent her from disclosing the incident. Unable to express it verbally, she weaves a tapestry and sends it to her sister, Procne, describing the whole incident. But at the end of the story she has been transformed into a nightingale and her song fills only a desert, suggesting that there is no one to listen to her story, rendering her fight invaluable. To the "dirty ears" of the modern people, her protest against a rapist, sounds only like "Jug, Jug" (Eliot). From this context, the topic of this paper emerges. After being raped, the world for the victim comes to an end. It is living like a dead person. It can be told that Philomela is the spokesperson for the raped women.

Though rape can happen to male people also, this paper is going to deal only with female section of the society, and will give a picture of victims' lives after being raped. In order to do this, a context is necessary like how the social

confusion regarding sex and gender creates the atmosphere for a woman in getting raped. This paper is going to discuss several topics which are interlinked:

- Social concept regarding sex and gender
- Violence against women
- Rape
- Life after being raped
- Trauma and its consequences

What Does Society Think About Sex and Gender?

“We live in a world which is organized around the idea that women and men have different bodies, different capabilities, and different needs and desires,” says Mary Holmes in her book, *What is Gender?: Sociological Approaches* (1). But the society utilises this “difference” in a negative way to classify one portion of the society as stronger and the other portion as weaker. The society sets a rulebook for both men and women. The patriarchal society has created this rulebook intentionally as a means to oppress the women and make them believe that they are actually feeble part of the society.

“Sex” is the biological difference based on which male/female/intersex category has been decided. On the other hand, “gender” is the social construction which decides the code of behaviour for men and women: “However, gender is more than a single piece of empirical data — a piece of clothing, a glance, a gesture — whereby we distinguish between people on the basis of their sex” (Wallace 252). In simple words, where sex is biological, gender is social. Being the product of society, gender has set specific pattern and normalises it in a way that men and women look themselves as “gendered beings – as men and women – and not merely (generic) human beings” (Wallace 252). Gender “has moved out of the realm of nature and into the realm of culture” (Wallace 252). Before changing the binary system of sex/gender, people should have a clear knowledge about how their identities have been constructed through this system. In relation to this confusion, the discussion will be incomplete without the famous quote of Simone de Beauvoir: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” in her 1949 book, *The Second Sex*.

The concept of gender makes the inferior status of women as natural. Men are always viewed as physically strong and intellectually superior and women are considered as the weaker part of the society who are always dependent on the male people for the fulfilment of the basic needs of their lives: “gender refers to the attribution of masculine or feminine to various behaviors, personality attributes, identities, and the social expectations and sanctions that reinforce these” (McCarthy and Gartner 5).

It can be said that women cannot claim her body as her own. The reason behind this is very interesting. Most of the people do not know that women’s sensitive body parts have been named by and after men. For example, fallopian, and G-spot have been named by Italian anatomist, Gabriello Fallopio and German gynecologist, Ernst Gräfenberg respectively. Men are present all over the women’s body and the gods are no exception. They “are engraved on women too” (Leah 2). Though Vesalius, the father of modern anatomy, first used the term in its modern sense, it came from the Greek masculine god of marriage, Hymen. One of the stories depicts that he “died on his wedding day” (March 408).

Etymologically, vagina comes from Latin *vagina*, meaning “sheath, scabbard, covering” (“Vagina”). Clitoris came from Greek *kleiein* means “to sheathe” or “to shut” (“Clitoris”). It can be said that women’s body parts have never been revered. The meanings attached to these body parts are derogatory in sense:

Though some of us might like to think of the vagina as sacred, and casual use of it as a desecration, it has never been revered. The name ‘vagina’ is itself an insult. In Latin the word means ‘scabbard’, that is, ‘sword sheath’. Why this ugly word should have been accepted by the ‘civilised’ world as the correct appellation for the birth canal is bewildering. The vernacular names for the vagina are now amongst the most shocking words anyone can say. (Greer)

Patriarchal society does not miss an opportunity to claim woman’s body and to place them in the secondary position. This process of naming automatically gives them superior standard. They want to show that the world requires the masculine power to move on. Because without their contribution women cannot deliver the future generation of the world. As if they have given identity to women by naming organs responsible for birth process. Does this process of naming give birth to the claiming of women’s body and sexual violation automatically?

Violence Against Women

In the foreword of the *World Report on violence and health* (2002), Nelson Mandela expresses his concern regarding the growing number of violence in the world:

The twentieth century will be remembered as a century marked by violence. It burdens us with its legacy of mass destruction, of violence inflicted on a scale never seen and never possible before in human history. But this legacy – the result of new technology in the service of ideologies of hate – is not the only one we carry, nor that we must face up to. (Krug et al.)

Violence happens every day in every corner of the world. It becomes a part of human experience in everyday life. Some of them are visible and most of the cases are invisible. When the violence against women happens out of sight in homes at the hands of the intimate partners, that remains invisible. "Many of the victims are too young, weak or ill to protect themselves. Others are forced by social conventions or pressures to keep silent about their experiences" (Krug et al. 3).

The concept of gender and the accumulation of power in the hands of the male people pave the way further for violence against women. The unequal position of men and women within the family structure is a kind of violence that percolates through it and makes a long lasting impact on the broader social scenario. As a result, women experience violence both "in their homes and on the streets" (Wallace 589).

WHO gives a definition in its 2002 report on violence and health:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (Krug et al. 5)

From this definition, one can say that violence is of three types "self-directed violence," "interpersonal violence," and "collective violence" (Krug et al. 6). The effect of violence can be a visible physical injury or an invisible, long-lasting psychological wound. Every violence will not result in injury or death of the person, but its mental impact can be more profound. It destroys the person slowly making her life unbearable. The analysis of all types of violence is not possible within a single paper. The present paper will focus only on sexual violence against women specially rape.

Rape

The word rape comes from the Latin *rapere* meaning "forceful seizure, act of snatching by force; plundering, robbery, extortion" ("Rape"). Given the changing scenario and pattern of sexual abuse, the definition of rape has changed over time. In *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, a definition has been given which tries to cover every possible aspect related to rape:

Most jurisdictions define rape as nonconsensual completed or attempted intercourse involving vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, hands, fingers, or foreign object; oral penetration by a penis, with the use of force or threat of force; or inability of a victim to provide consent as a result of age, intoxication, or other factors. (O'Brien 701)

In almost every warfare, the primary victims used to be women and children: "As a military device, rape is a form of aggression used against other men" (Baker 239). From the time immemorial, women are considered as men's property: "Some men also come to understand that rape can be used as a tool against other men" (Baker 238). So, the violation of this property means degradation of the men's honour. Very few people think about the mental condition of the woman who gets raped. Everyone is busy in finding the way out to restore the lost family prestige, no one cares for her. As a result, majority of the rape cases escape punishment and the rapists move around freely waiting for their next prey. It can be said, "Rape is an extension of normal heterosexual arrangements and a form of social control of all women" (Code).

Rape is not "a personal misfortune but an experience shared by all women in one form or another" (Connell and Wilson). The unequal position of men and women results in the violence against women. The rule of superiority of men and inferiority of women has been formulated by the patriarchal society to subjugate the female section. By putting "power, wealth, and knowledge in men's hands," this society makes women "dependent on men's largesse and approval" (Nicholls 30). But, they fail to understand that if one portion of the society remains passive and powerless, the overall development of the society will not be possible. The process of women's subjugation has been described very clearly in the book, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*:

Man has invented standards of superiority (male) and inferiority (female). Unsupported by reality as this idea is, man is always uneasy and threatened by the possibility that woman will one day claim her full right to human existence, so he has found ways to enslave her. He has married her, and through the family, binds her to him as wife and mother to his children. He has kept her helpless and dependent, forcing her to work when he needed her labor, isolating her, beating her (physically or psychologically), and as a final proof of his power and her debasement as a possession, a thing, a chunk of meat, he has raped her. The act of rape is the logical expression of the essential relationship now existing between men and women. (Connell and Wilson)

The sense of powerlessness and worthlessness has been put into the heads of the women from their early childhood. As a result, they not only become physically isolated but also psychologically isolated from the mainstream society. It is a conspiracy against all women, so that they cannot communicate among themselves regarding the violence that has been committed against them. Patriarchal society fears the bonding among women. It knows very well that if women begin to listen to one another then the status quo of the male dominance will be collapsed:

It is only when women begin to communicate and to compare their pain that its origins are exposed. Through consciousness-raising we begin to recognize that our private humiliations are universal and part of a larger pattern. In a society where all the major institutions protect male prerogatives, women have only themselves to turn to. Conditioned to view males as our protectors and every other woman as a potential rival, the act of communication

among women allows us to discover not only the hypocrisy of male protection in all its forms, from chivalry to "special" legislation, but also to discover that a common bond exists between all women. We also find new emotional strength. (Connell and Wilson 7)

Rape Culture

In her book, *Dismantling Rape Culture: The Peacebuilding Power of 'Me Too,'* Tracey Nicholls says:

A culture need not be something we honour, or are proud to be part of; despite the generally positive connotations we ascribe to the word, 'culture' is simply a label that points to an environment of embedded expectations for the individuals who act within it. (26)

Culture makes some things to look normal. It is culture which makes the dominance of men and the subjugation of women look normal. People take it as something acceptable. This acceptance and no complaining tendency have given birth to rape culture. Rape culture is something which normalises rape, belittles the agony of the raped victims and as a result, the rapists go unpunished. Television, media, and films are in a way responsible for this type of culture:

In most of the cultures that comprise our globalised world—the one that appears in films, in news media, on Facebook—men are normalised as the hunters for sex and the conquerors of women; women are normalised as the guardians of our own chastity and virtue. (Nicholls 27)

This culture continues to exist because of "societal attitudes about gender and sexuality" (Valentine).

Instead of punishing rapists, society teaches its female section how to avoid getting raped by setting some rules and regulations. They are taught that if they dress, speak, and act in a provocative manner, it will automatically welcome men to assault them (Tal 20). They are also taught that "there is a thin line between seduction and rape, and that it is their responsibility to keep men from crossing that line" (Tal 20). By posing this "rape threat" in front of women, they want to prove that the lives of women are always in danger if not protected by male people from the male lust.

Rape Myth

According to the online *Cambridge Dictionary*, myth means "a commonly believed but false idea" ("Myth"). Similarly, rape myths are "assumptions about the act of rape and the victims of rape that frequently reduce empathy for – and even shift blame to – the victim. Often unproven or wrong, rape myths are widely accepted" (Valentine). Chanda Valentine points out the difference between rape myth and rape truth in her article "Rape Culture and Rape Myth." Taking the inspiration from that article, the present research will try to focus on the difference between rape myth and rape truth through table 1.

Table 1 *Difference Between Rape Myth and Rape Truth*

	Rape Myth	Rape Truth
1.	Revealing clothes welcome rapists.	Clothes cannot decide who will be raped.
2.	Rape is something about "sexual attraction and gratification" (Valentine).	Rape is all about "power, control and domination" (Valentine).
3.	Woman not filing any case against her rapist proves that she is not raped at all.	Shame, guilt and fear can prevent a raped victim from telling the truth.
4.	Women should protect their honour and chastity. Because once a man is sexually excited, he cannot control himself.	Male dominated society always keep women in fear and holds them responsible for their own misfortune.
5.	Only mentally sick people rape.	One cannot judge a book by its cover.
6.	"Respectable women do not get raped. Promiscuous women invite rape" (Valentine).	"Rape can happen to any type of person" (Valentine).
7.	Rape can be prevented if it meets with proper resistance.	Resistance does not work when the perpetrator is more powerful.
8.	Only strangers can rape.	Not only strangers, known people also can be rapists. Suppression of the incident saves the known rapists most of the time.

Life after Being Raped

Tag of "Rape Victims"

Once raped, the status of the woman will be changed. She will see that she is no longer the subject, but the object of compassion, discussion and criticism. Suddenly her original name gets vanished only to be replaced by the label "rape victim." In this status, she cannot live her life as per her wish and she will lose all the authority in her life.

She cannot even take a decision regarding any matter anymore. The tag of “rape victim” disempowers the woman and indirectly breaks her mental strength. She will suffer from identity crisis.

Accusation, Shame and Social Stigma

In every other crime, sympathy goes towards the victim, but, for the raped victims, the case is just the opposite. Women have to bear the burden of guilt and shame for which she is not responsible:

Just as honor is always present and at the same time invisible in the discourses surrounding rape, the concept that results from honor—or from its loss—is also omnipresent: shame. It used to be the case that when a woman’s honor was stolen, she was disgraced and had to react with shame. (Sanyal)

There is usually a mixed reactions among people including women. Most of the people become busy in accusing the victim. In place of punishing the rapist, surprisingly, victim’s character, behaviour, life style, past relationship, and dressing style become the topic for discussion.

Sometimes, people do not even want to believe in the victim’s words. When she tells someone about the incident, the common responses come like these: "You're lying," "It was your fault," "You should have been more careful," "You're exaggerating" (Connell and Wilson 3). As a result, social stigma, blame, guilt and shame engulf the victim’s life: “In summary, shame marks the experience of being seen as bad, not just in one’s own eyes, but in the eyes of others. . . . Shame is thus quintessentially self-conscious and social in nature” (Frewen and Lanius). Shame can impact on one’s capacity to make eye contact and leads to “averted gaze” (Frewen and Lanius). It happens because the victim thinks if she makes eye contact with others, they can see her and get hold of what is happening inside her and will also know that she is a bad person (Frewen and Lanius).

Notwithstanding helping the victim, she is pushed into the darkness by the society. She is treated like an outcaste and as a consequence, she becomes lonely and abandoned. Even in most of the cases, the family members refuse to take the victim back into their lives because of the fear of disgrace. Everyone becomes busy in finding ways to protect the lost honour of the family, no one will pay attention to the mental condition of the victim. Family members want to restore the lost honour by not disclosing the incident, forcing her to remain silent, and if the rapist is a known person, they compel her to marry the rapist. According to popular belief, rape can happen only to those women who refuses to go by the standards of the society. So, if anything happens, it was solely her fault:

A woman who is raped while alone at night or in a deserted place is blamed for "asking for it." The implication is that her behavior disregards safety precautions; the extension of this is that she is responsible for any harm done to her, and she is, in fact, frequently accused of desiring her own rape. A man in the same situation, who might be robbed or mugged, is not judged this harshly. The actuality is that both men and women are attacked in such circumstances because of their vulnerability. And the crux of rape is woman's vulnerability. Women are conditioned to be helpless property requiring the protection of a male owner. (Connell and Wilson 85-86)

Loneliness

“Sexual abuse is still the best kept secret in the world,” and this secret can cause trauma to the victim (Clancy 178). Victim is accused for her tragedy but she hardly gets mental support from anyone. After being raped, she becomes broken from inside: “UNANTICIPATED SHOCKS like rape overwhelm mind and body” (Waites 40). At this time, a little mental support can be helpful for her: “What victims need and want from others, in their own words, is very simple—acknowledgment and empathy” (Clancy 172). Within the family, friend circle, and in the society, she has been treated like an outcaste: “This feeling of alienation, of being in a world devoid of meaning and vitality, appears to be a common experience among rape survivors” (Mui 156). Gradually, loneliness overwhelms her and throws her into an abyss. Negative responses and criticism from others make her feel guilty and give birth to self-blame. This kind of “social victimization” causes the “psychological and physical trauma” (Hockett 41).

Humiliation at the Court: A Second Rape

Being one of the leading institutions of the patriarchal society, most of the judges appear as male. A woman usually feels uncomfortable in front of the male people at the time of describing the exact incident. She has to prove that she has been raped against her will and has not asked for it or participated in it. She has to present evidence and witness in order to prove herself innocent. It is very surprising that instead of putting the accused on the trial, the accuser has been interrogated. Focus has been shifted from the accused to the accuser. Her life style, dressing pattern, behaviour, everything are put on trial. If she cannot prove herself innocent and “good girl,” her case gets dismissed and the accused escapes. After the actual physical rape, in the courtroom, she gets mentally raped: “The negative experiences of many women who have been raped after being blamed and doubted by others have also been termed the ‘second rape’” (Hockett 41). Victim-blaming is a common trend among people. Victim-blaming attitude discourages women from reporting abuse. If she passes the societal standard of “good girl,” there will be a possibility to win the case and get the desirable justice.

Trauma: Its Cause and Effect

What is Trauma?

Online Etymology Dictionary gives the etymological origin of the word trauma. It comes from Greek *trauma*, meaning “a wound, a hurt; a defeat” (“Trauma”). As the body is the gateway of interactions between inner and outer world, it can be said that “the body is the site of imagination, representation, and emotions through which our reality, including our sense of self, is constructed” (Mui 153). When the body is violated, “one’s reality” has been collapsed, “one’s personal identity” has been destroyed and “one’s world also becomes undone” (Mui 153, 156).

Judith Herman, in her book, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, has discussed about the background of trauma and how it comes into its present status related to sexual violence. People were aware of trauma and its effect from centuries past, but each time its context and interpretation were different. She has mentioned three scenarios. The first type of trauma was related to hysteria, “the archetypal psychological disorder of women. Its study grew out of the republican, anticlerical political movement of the late nineteenth century in France” (Herman). The second was related to “shell shock or combat neurosis” and its research started “in England and the United States after the First World War and reached a peak after the Vietnam War” (Herman). The third and the recent type of trauma is related to “sexual and domestic violence” and “its political context is the feminist movement in Western Europe and North America” (Herman). Trauma which comes into present understanding is the synthesis of these three “separate lines of investigation” (Herman).

Cathy Caruth in her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, talks about the “double wound” inflicted by trauma (Caruth 3). She says that the original Greek term *trauma* refers to the bodily wound, but later its usage in the “medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud’s text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3). Its emotional shock is so powerful that it can create “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (Caruth 4). Unlike the bodily wound that can be healed over time, emotional wound is “not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (Caruth 4). Trauma is “as much about remembering how we survived as it is about what is broken” (Kolk). Trauma is a prolonged suffering that extended beyond its physical injury. Patients of trauma should not be dismissed by labelling them “mentally sick,” but the reason for her trauma should be taken into account.

Physical wound will be healed with the course of time, but psychological wound takes time to get properly repaired. Though medical treatment is the initial requirement, this is insufficient, and cannot heal a raped victim completely. She needs proper care, mental support in order to get her former self back into her life. Because of trauma, she suffers from identity crisis and sometimes relives the actual incident which can be the main hindrance in the path of her recovery: “They also leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems” (Kolk).

The effect of trauma can be different for every single person. One may have prolonged suffering, whether other can recover quickly. So, keeping this fact in mind, treatment for the traumatised people should be diverse in nature. One type of treatment cannot be suitable for every tormented person. Psychological wound, if not properly healed, will kill that person one piece at a time. As a result of psychological trauma, women can experience depression, anxiety, fear, anger, humiliation, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (i.e., intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and hyperarousal), sexual disorders (including fear of engaging in sexual activity), mood disorders, borderline personality disorder, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, nightmares, fear of crowds, fear of situations reminiscent of the rape situation, and fear of being alone (Hockett 15).

When the body and mind feel uneasy, they give signals, but these signals if unanswered, will lengthen the suffering.

How Trauma Affects the Brain Structure

A basic picture of the human brain structure is needed in order to have a complete knowledge of trauma. The major part of the human brain, known as cerebrum, is divided into two sections – the right and left cerebral hemispheres. Bessel van der Kolk states that trauma strikes the two parts of the brain – left and right – differently. The language and function of the two parts are different from each other: “We now know that the two halves of the brain do speak different languages. The right is intuitive, emotional, visual, spatial, and tactual, and the left is linguistic, sequential, and analytical” (Kolk). Images of the past traumatic experiences “activate the right hemisphere of the brain and deactivate the left” (Kolk). But in normal situation the two divisions work together. Balance between the rational and emotional brains makes one feel like herself (Kolk). The conflict between these two causes “physical discomfort and psychological misery” (Kolk). Rational or conscious brain focuses mostly on the outside world. In order to start the healing journey, one has to look into the inner self and experiences which can be possible through activating the emotional brain.

How Trauma Affects the Memory

There are differences of opinion regarding the effect of trauma on memory. The first wave trauma theorists like Judith Herman, Bessel A. van der Kolk, Cathy Caruth propound that traumatic memory is so intense that the mind cannot process it normally. They also mention that if traumatic memories return then it would be non-verbal and the person cannot express it in words (Pederson 334). According to Bessel A. van der Kolk et al., trauma is unspeakable and amnesic:

What may most complicate the capacity to communicate about traumatic experiences is that memories of trauma may have no verbal (explicit) component whatsoever. Instead, the memories may have been organized on an implicit or perceptual level, without any accompanying narrative about what happened (Kolk et al. 287).

Judith Herman also suggests the same thing: “Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (Herman).

But recent trauma theorist, Richard J. McNally challenges these notions and says that traumatic victim may choose not to speak about their traumatic experience but that does not mean that they cannot speak. “Trauma is memorable and describable,” and there is nothing like traumatic amnesia (Pederson 334). McNally states:

However, one cannot conclude that a person who does not think about something for a long period of time – who has “forgotten” it, in everyday parlance – is suffering from amnesia. Amnesia is an *inability* to recall information that has been encoded. (McNally 184)

McNally also challenges Bessel A. van der Kolk’s notion of non-verbal nature of traumatic memory by saying: “Contrary to van der Kolk’s theory, trauma does not block the formation of narrative memory. That memory for trauma can be expressed as physiologic reactivity to traumatic reminders does not preclude its being expressed in narrative as well” (McNally 180). This new theory regarding verbal expression of traumatic memory will help the victim in gaining strength and it has a healing power. The notion of traumatic amnesia can be harmful and frightening for the victim (Pederson 338). Narrating traumatic experience to others helps the survivor to gain control over the traces of the traumatic event. Pederson suggests that traumatic memory may not be kept only in visual format, but it can be “multi-sensory; victims may record not only visual cues, but aural, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory ones as well” (Pederson 339).

The Outcome of Trauma

“Like a splinter that causes an infection, it is the body’s response to the foreign object that becomes the problem more than the object itself” (Kolk). Trauma is not a distant thing. It can happen to anyone at anytime: “One does not have to be a combat soldier, or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, and our neighbors” (Kolk). Its effect is so pervasive that it affects not only the person directly exposed to traumatic experience, but also to the people around that person. The impact of trauma cannot be described in a single way because it is “dependent on the individual’s subjective experience” (Emerson and Hopper). Some of its possible outcomes are: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Depression, Dissociation, Flashbacks, and Suicidal thoughts.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is the common aftereffect of those people who are suffering from trauma. “PTSD was first recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 in the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*” (McNally 8). Judith Herman has mentioned three categories of the symptoms of PTSD: hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction (Herman). In the case of hyperarousal, the person always remains hypervigilant. She thinks that the previous type of danger can return at anytime. For this, she cannot sleep peacefully and becomes frightened by any small incident. Intrusion happens when traumatic event comes back repeatedly to the person’s life and she feels as if the event is happening in the present. It disturbs the person’s normal course of life. She feels like she cannot move forward and her “time stops at the moment of trauma” (Herman). Constriction happens when the person feels numb and powerless. In this state, a rape survivor often cannot feel her body as her own.

Depression

Depression is the common outcome of a raped woman who is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): The clinical picture of depression consists of low mood and/or loss of interest or pleasure in regular activities, together with appetite and sleep disturbances, restlessness or agitation, fatigue or low energy, feelings of worthlessness or guilt, loss of concentration, and possibly suicidal thoughts. (Kaminer and Eagle 42)

Dissociation

In a normal situation, “thoughts, feelings, behaviors, sensations, and other mental processes” remain connected, but trauma causes dissociation among these (Boyer et al.). Bessel A. van der Kolk states:

Dissociation is the essence of trauma. The overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived.

It is a kind of coping mechanism to distance oneself from “emotions, cognitions, or somatic symptoms” (Emerson and Hopper). As the body is the centre of feeling pain, dissociation often helps the victim to escape from the physical and emotional pain: “Dissociation is a psychobiological mechanism that allows the mind, in effect, to flee what the body is experiencing, thus maintaining a selective conscious awareness that has survival value” (Waites 14). Though dissociation and detachment can work as “protective internal coping mechanisms” for the victim at the initial stage, these will not be effective for the long term, and will ultimately “create ongoing difficulties” (Kaminer and Eagle 44-45).

Flashbacks

Victims of trauma generally try to push it away from their minds in order to avoid its unbearable pain. But this avoidance is not easy, and traumatic memory comes back repeatedly to haunt the victims. Traumatic memory disturbs the normal routine of the victims. Traumatic event itself has “a beginning and an end – at some point it is over,” but people who are affected with PTSD, flashback “can occur at any time, whether they are awake or asleep” (Kolk). It is worse than the trauma, because its uncertain nature prevents the people from taking effective precautions: “There is no way of knowing when it’s going to occur again or how long it will last” (Kolk). Flashbacks, the sense of reliving the past traumatic events as if they are happening in the present, represent “trauma-related altered states of consciousness (TRASC)” (Frewen and Lanius).

Suicidal Thoughts

In order to escape from pain and shame, many victims choose the path of committing suicide. They have no other option left to live. They feel abandoned, hopeless, and worthless. They feel themselves as the burden for everyone including the family members. “Suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completions speak of many issues” (Black 33). Suicide not only hints at the failure to recover and lack of courage to live, but it also indicates the shame, guilt, anger, depression that the victim have tolerated for a long period. While some people consider this act as the better option than living with certain horrible memories and shame, for others, “the act of suicide seems to grant power that compensates for the powerlessness in their life” (Black 33-34).

Conclusion

Many trauma survivors can overcome the traumatic effect within a short span, while others take long period. As discussed earlier, its effect varies from one person to another: “traumatic experience is unique for each trauma survivor” (Kaminer and Eagle 59). For example, two rape survivors with PTSD cannot have same type of experiences (Kaminer and Eagle 59). Though PTSD is the common symptom of the traumatic victims and it gets lots of attention, other symptoms like depression, flashbacks, suicidal thoughts also haunt the victims. Like PTSD, these symptoms should also be taken into account.

After the experience of trauma, the life cannot be the same like before. For a raped survivor, her previous worldview and concept may be altered and challenged due to the effect of trauma. Most common outcome is the negative impact upon the perception of the self. The survivor must search for new meaning in order to move forward. For some survivors, traumatic event can leave behind a sense of worthlessness and raise troubling questions for which they have no satisfactory answers. While at the same time, other survivors, traumatic experience can strengthen their mental strength because of “having survived something very difficult” (Kaminer and Eagle 73). Positive outcome of trauma can change one’s “philosophy of life,” and teach them to appreciate and find happiness in small things “that were previously taken for granted” (Kaminer and Eagle 74). Traumatic experience can have a negative as well as positive impact upon the survivor:

Others may develop a new appreciation for themselves, other people and life in general. Yet others may experience a combination of feelings – it seems that the outcomes of trauma are not purely negative or positive, but often a complex mix of the two. Regardless of the outcome, the process of struggling to answer the question ‘why?’ is an important part of trying to adapt to a traumatic experience. (Kaminer and Eagle 79)

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