

## TRAUMA AND REMEMBERING IN EARNEST HEMINGWAY'S *A FAREWELL TO ARMS*

*Badri Prasad Pokharel, Lecturer of English  
Research Division, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur  
pokharelbadri@yahoo.com*

### ABSTRACT

*Human beings have been coming across different kinds of traumatic experiences since the very beginning of the human civilization. Such experiences have become one of the issues, which can be discussed and interpreted while reading the literary texts. For example, Ernest Hemingway has produced fictional works that reveal the horrible war experiences and whose characters participate in the war, endure fatal events, and get badly victimized, having traumatic experiences. A Farewell to Arms written in 1929, one of his literary masterpieces, brings out those experiences which the main character Henry endures and is badly traumatized by the horrible consequences. The activities that he involves either in the World War I, as an ambulance driver or has a love affair with a British nurse Catherine, are all related to his traumatic experiences. As a traumatic hero of the novel, he would not have anything except remembering those horrible memories that he probably wants to forget, but as much as he tries to forget them, he remembers a lot.*

**KEYWORDS:** Trauma, holocaust, catastrophe, nightmare, massacre

### INTRODUCTION

The present paper attempts to analyze Earnest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* from the perspective of trauma. The novel is about the traumatic events that deal with the severely distressing event of the World War I. The characters of the novel go through traumatic experiences and they often have certain symptoms and problems afterward. The paper also tries to analyze their impact on how people remember traumatic events and those symptoms and problems of the characters that are caused by the same distressing events. The paragraphs below have discussed the origin of the term 'trauma', its definition and how it can be applied to the study of a piece of literature such as Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*.

### TRAUMA, LITERATURE AND INTERPRETATION

In its original form, the word 'trauma' has been used in the medical field that refers to some serious injuries or mental shocks. Some fatal accidents or violent events that an individual experiences may cause the mass extinction or other physical destruction. From this perspective, it has become a subject of modern literary writing that deals with the ongoing wars, ethnic conflicts, racial dis-

crimination, religious wars, etc. Thus, the word has its origin in the holocaust, which is being noticed in different parts of the world in different times.

The phenomenon of trauma can be seen from the two approaches: psycho-analytic-formalistic approach and cultural approach. According to the first approach, the victim does not expose to the real experience of trauma, rather it shows something different in a very distorted and deceptive manner. This is done in an attempt to avoid the possible catastrophes. According to Sigmund Freud,

Reminiscences that cause the hysterical suffering are historical in the sense that they link to actual traumas in the patient's life. The injured person's reaction to the trauma only exercises a completely cathartic effect if it is an adequate reaction and the past that continues to wound is the past originally found no outlet. (189)

But cultural approach shows the undercurrent activities of the distorted network of cultural politics.

Traumatic theory includes diverse fields focusing on psychological, philosophical, ethical as well as aesthetic issues about the nature and representation of traumatic events. Thus, trauma is not only a medical trope, but now it has also become a multidisciplinary discourse. For example, Dominick Lacarpa, James Berger, Cathy Caruth, Ryan Lamothe, Geoffrey Hartman and many others have based their theories of trauma on Freud's psychoanalysis. Literary interest in trauma and traumatic events is very meaningful and works of both creative artists and critics have reflected the contemporary cultural understanding of the nature of psychological trauma. Most of the recent literary critical writings on trauma and memory is deeply rooted in psychological approaches which are closely related to Freudian and Lacanian theories. In this context, Caruth says,

Trauma describes an overwhelming experiences of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relieve it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century. (181)

Matters related to family dysfunctions, child abuse, incest, spousal abuse in the media and talk shows, etc. would be the subjects for writing literary forms. Besides, family breakdown and violence have become the interest of enigmatic figure of the survivor, the one who has faced the catastrophe and can tell the survivors what it is like. The survivor is a kind of living 'black box', a source of final knowledge of authority.

Many writers like Edkins Jenny have shown some connections between trauma, violence and political community. Traumas such as wars or persecutions have been inscribed and reinscribed into every kind of narratives. Trauma takes place in practices of reminiscences, demoralization and witnessing. The memory of trauma that a witness faces is not straightforward because some

## TRAUMA AND REMEMBERING

forms of remembering can be in the way of forgetting. It is the way of recovering from trauma by putting its lessons to outside and refusing to acknowledge anything that changes over the span of time. In such a condition, after the traumatic events, there remains a struggle over memory. Edkins further says, "As far as memory is concerned, how we remember a war, for example, and the way in which we acknowledge and describe what we call trauma can be very much influenced by dominant views, that is, by the state . . . can be contested and challenged" (11). The essence of trauma is too horrible to be remembered. Traumatic events can not be forgotten and are haunted as nightmares and flashback scenes of unimaginable horror.

Now, at the moment, trauma has been stretched from psychic life to public story, reading materials that can include different literary genres, psychiatric histories, accounts of sexual abuse, memoirs, documentaries, etc. And trauma theory can be understood as a tool in which different critical approaches can be discussed and dealt with. Anxiety, frustration, alienation, depression, broken relationship, dislocation and many other physical and mental diseases are created by the chaotic and destructive world affairs. The events such as the World War I and II are those subjects or issues that make the survivors traumatic hereafter. Thus, the society can be seen disintegrated with its internal conflict with the development of modern technology, urbanization, industrialization, and even globalization that has come out breaking the timeline of the past. The narratives of Hemingway can be taken as examples of such practices in which his characters go through the traumatic experiences.

### TRAUMA OF HEMINGWAY

In his novels and short stories, Hemingway has presented man as trapped creature seeking love, communion and fulfillment in an alien and meaningless world. His characters are traumatized. War and violence are prevalent in each of his novels that cause trauma in the characters. Man is perpetually threatened by violent death and courage, and the power of his endurance makes him active to face adverse situations. However, he is sick, wounded and deformed by the life he is living and even the environment he has to sustain seems unsuitable to him. War as a symbol of death and destruction does not bring anything good to anybody rather one gets threatened for the existence in the universe. Hemingway narrates in his *A Farewell to Arms*,

If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks everyone and afterwards many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break, it kills. It kills the good and the very gentle and the very gentle and the very brave impatiently face the ongoing situations. (258)

Hence, he remains in the traumatic state from which he can neither escape nor adjust to his situation and has to go through the very pathetic and helpless condition.

Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, published in 1929 and written on the

periphery of his experience in the World War I, depicts a character that is presented as an ambulance driver, which faces many violent events that make him traumatized hereafter. Its main character, Frederic Henry, an autobiographical figure, formulates a system of love to exist on the earth, but he could not succeed in his mission as his dream gets shattered into pieces. However, he bears every problem stoically and never seeks anyone's help.

His failure in the quest of a meaningful life and his agonizing defeat finally leaves him in painful condition. Either his escape from the war for the sake of love for Catherine whom he loves and sacrifices everything for her. Her premature tragic demise or his facing the chaos of series of catastrophes one after another finally leaves him in such condition. In fact, he neither escapes nor tackles them courageously. While sitting outside the operation theatre in the Swiss Hospital and looking forward to hearing the condition of Catherine, who had just given birth to a dead child, he says, "One died without knowing what it was all about" (338). Here, he must bear the terrible burden of pain of death that mostly all living beings have to face in any forms. He has no divine father and is abandoned to a life of care, anxiety and failure that will end in the death with nothing after that. Here, his longing for happiness has turned into a curse. The joys of life may be spoilt by the forthcoming death.

This very tragic vision leads him to face the perception of tragedy of life that any pain or suffering should be faced alone and tolerated gratuitously at any rate. Once in hospital, he says, "Human life is like the basketball, they told you the rules and the first time they caught you off abuse, they killed you or they killed you gratuitously like Aymo" (338). He is badly injured at the battlefield while helping the wounded soldiers and he could see death very closely through suffering. This severe injury makes him actualize the psychic burden that one has to go through along with other burdens. The experience that he gets badly injured is in a sense equivalent to death itself. Hence, at the presence of death, he discovers the true meaning of self and the rest of the world. The wound has traumatically separated him from others. Then, he no longer remains 'patriot' and avoids the significance of patriotism.

This traumatic violence makes him completely isolated from the lump of humanity that he belongs to. The sufferings and bitter war experience make him notice the gap between the hollowness of traditional ideas and ideals, clashes and slogans related to war. Henry says,

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. . . . They were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. . . . Abstract words such glory honour, courage or hollow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (191)

Besides, the description of wars, violence, massacre, maimed trunks, dusty leaves, the early fallen leaves, brown plain and bare mountains, dead and brown vineyards, the painful winter, the rain and cholera, etc. are used in the novel to

## TRAUMA AND REMEMBERING

signify very destructive atmosphere that make the characters suffer in anyway. Such painful occurrences remain imprinted in the mind that cannot be forgotten in anyway.

Like Henry, Catherine is also found in the similar condition. She has lost her fiancé at the battlefield of Somme. As a nurse, she heals the wounded soldiers and as a beloved cures Henry who is physically and psychologically wounded in the war. Her pregnancy, her desire for domestic life, home image, purchasing of baby clothes and Henry's proposal for marriage and many other events like that could not soothe him. Rather she leaves him in a state where, he in an attempt to forget remembers each and every such moment that he had dreamt to have with her. 'Rain', a symbolic representation of misfortunes in the novel, makes her very thoughtful. Once she says, "I'm afraid of rain because sometimes I see me dead in it. And sometimes I see you dead in it" (131). Her death is an irony on the situation because her death at the childbirth and at the commencement of a so-called happy conjugal life seems very meaningful.

At the Swiss Hospital, the child is found dead, Catherine has a terrible hemorrhage that helps her die slowly and slowly bleeding continuously. Henry has to see her die. He does not see any other ways except an earnest praying, "Oh God! Please, please, please, dear God, don't let her die" (341). He could not do anything except staying beside her until she becomes unconscious and later dies. He even wanted to stay with the dead body of Catherine but later thought it was no use and says, "It was like saying good-bye to a statue" (343). Her death is a terrible event that he has to undergo with. He has run away from the war front disobeying his seniors for her love that he finds dead or useless. This finally lets him remain in an uncertain and chaotic position.

## CONCLUSION

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway, presenting modern mechanical war that kills the age-old heroic ideals and demolishes the moral and social values, has presented man becoming the victim of the prevailing war and his bad luck which makes him remain in trauma. His character Henry, in an attempt to forget all those horrible and terrible events, remains remembering the events one after another. For Henry, Catherine is a source of life losing her due to bad luck; he is left with nothing like a stray dog, nosing in the waste bin and getting nothing - from loneliness to loneliness. If anything is left to him that is the traumatic memory of his beloved, he is to gather to live again in a state of alienation and apathy.

## WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. Bangalore: Eastern Press, 2004.
- Bell, Duncan. *Memory, Trauma and World Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Cathy, Caruth et al. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of His-

***Crossing the Border: International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies***

tory." *The New York Times Review* 76.2 (June 1985): 179-87.

Freud, Sigmund. *Studies on Hysteria*. London: Penguin Books, 1978.

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. 1st ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929.

Najita, Susan Y. *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific: Reading History and Trauma in Contemporary Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.