

Identitarian Trauma of Joe Christmas in William Faulkner's

Light In August

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Abstract

William Faulkner is confronted with the problem of identitarian trauma experienced by the characters of his novel *Light in August*. Ronald David Laing in his famous book *The Divided Self* provides an account of persons who suffer trauma in their life. William Faulkner's characters in the novel *Light in August* suffer from cultural and psychological traumas "differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that their identity and autonomy are never in question" (R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self* 41). Eric Erikson (1956) focused on identity and described it as "a persistent sameness within oneself and of essential character with others" (57). Erickson laid emphasis on the core identity of the individual different from social identity. He is considered as an outsider in the society because of the power structure of institutions and organizations and this isolation becomes the root cause of Identitarian trauma. This concept is further investigated by O.F. Kernberg (1984) in his book *Severe Personality Disorder*. Kernberg used the term personality organization and explored the nature of the institutions that block the growth of identity of the individuals. Sigmund Freud also confronted this problem as he noted that "a safe privacy of a common mental construction and a clear consciousness of inner identity as a Jew" (Freud 274). The individual identity is crushed by the power structure of the big institutions and the organizations controlled by the capitalists. William Faulkner's novel *Light in*

August explores the issue of Identitarian trauma found in his characters. The plot of the novel gives the fullest exploration Identitarian trauma because by hybrid identity of Joe Christmas due to his alienation and traumatic experiences.

Keywords: Identitarian, Trauma, Alienation, Cultural, Exploration, Hybrid, Traumatic, Experiences

Introduction

Faulkner's *Light in August* excited great interest among the critics and the reviewers of Faulkner who expressed their divergent views. Faulkner has been studied for his narrative methods, his vision of the South, his characterization and the treatment of the blacks. Alfred Kazin, Clifton Fadiman, Norman Podhoretz found Faulkner described the black consciousness in his novel. On the other hand, critics like Olga Vickery, A Frederick, J. Hoffman, Cleanth Brooks and Malcolm Cowley discussed Faulkner's concern for the history of the South. Russell Warren Howe (1956) gave the first full length study of Faulkner investigating the identitarian trauma of Joe Christmas. Fowler states that "Light stands for values that ate Southern, protestant, white and regrettably racist" Darkness refers to the private world, the individual and his quest for identify" (Fowler 307). In this research paper the theory of deflation of self and identitarian trauma of O.F. Kernberg has been applied on the characters of Faulkner. The first prominent cause of deflation of self of the characters was the experience of the cultural trauma. The people of the South felt traumatized after the defeat in the war. The South is different from other regions through feelings of racial pride and belongings that characterize its people who think of their identity connected with their region. This attachment sheds light on the power of society on identity. The people of the South exerted punishment on the minorities of the South as a way to overcome their traumatic past. This punishment lies in "violence, lynching and castration. The image of the glorious South was destroyed and was represented as a myth that cannot be reached because it became a mere memory of the past of the South" (Singal 168). The result of the distortion of the image of Glory leads to a cultural trauma. Jeffrey observes that the term "occurs when members of a collectively feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future

identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Jeffrey 1). William Faulkner presents Joe Christmas of *Light in August* as a “trauma victim” who is in a continuous quest for identity. Tekuo (2008) observes that a trauma victim “represents and understands the events that leak into the seedbed of his painful consciousness” (3). Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden and Lena Grove are the victims of cultural and psychological traumas. Lena Grove is impregnated by a stranger and she becomes an outcast. Joe Christmas is subjected to physical torture by his adopted father. The adopted mother of Joe Christmas locks Joanna’s door against Christmas advances. Childhood memory of Joe Christmas takes a serious toll on his adult life, disparaging him with deep resentment of himself.

Joe’s adopted father Mr. McEachern gives a brutal treatment to him in an attempt to force religion onto him: “When the strap fell, he did not flinch, no quiver passed over his face. He was looking straight ahead, with a rapt, calm expression like a monk in a picture” (145).. The progression of Joe’s life in the novel is not completely linear and is often baffling. He is first presented in the novel as a man in his thirties who appears at the “Jefferson planting mill looking for work” (Faulkner, 31). Joe is left in an orphanage at Christmas by his grandfather, Doc Hines. McEachern often abuses and insults him.

Joe’s quest for identity brings him untold miseries; segregation, nausea and alienation. Being lonely and depressed, Joe begins his love affair with a white waitress. The harsh treatment of McEachern creates in Joe a feeling paralysis and confusion. His mind doesn’t know kindness and mercy and he turns out to be a black devil. Joe “beats his adopted father severely and leaves him dead (204). He becomes a wanderer and spends the next fifteen years of his life in wandering until he reaches Jefferson. He joins the local mill and settles in an improvised cabin. It is here that Joanna Burden comes in his contact. Joe is an outcast and doesn’t belong to any society. Joe Christmas is destined to suffer and die and he lived struggling for identitarian trauma. Joe learnt the art of suppressing his emotional volcano and endured the physical violence and psychological oppression silently. Soon, anger explodes into violence with “something of the exaltation of his adoptive father he sprang full and of his own accord into the stranger’s fists” (218). Joe struggles in his life with his identity of being a Negro

Joe Christmas in *Light in August* experience discrimination, violence and isolation and sorrow. One day Joe meets a black prostitute in a shed something overwhelms him: “something in him trying to get out: and he loses it and kicks the girl and starts beating her. It is “smelling the woman smelling the Negro all at once” (156). When Joe is seventeen he finds Bobbie, a young white waitress. Joe began to sneak into town to meet with her at night and loses his virginity to her, later paying her with candy and coin. One night lying in bed he exposes his secret identity to her:

You noticed my skin, my hair...”

She whispered also. “Yes I thought maybe you were a foreigner. That you never come from around here.”

It’s different from that, even. More than just a foreigner. You can’t guess.”

What? How more different?

I got some nigger blood in me.” (Faulkner 196)

Joe’s identitarian trauma is intensified by his alienation, ill-treatment by his father and his humiliation by the dietician. Joe hopes that Bobbie will accept him despite his black blood. But her rejection shatters his confidence and results into the loss of self. Joe Christmas diverts his attention into drinking, smoking and sex to distract himself. In desperation he kills McEachern as he admits: “I said I would kill him some day I told him so” (206). He rides back to Bobbie’s place to take her with him and in hopes of running away together and plans to marry her. Bobbie rejects his proposal and brings up his black blood to justify her refusal of him: “He told me himself he was a nigger!” (218). Joe is in a state of shock when Bobbie rejects him. Joe is desperate for he becomes aware that nobody loves him and he belongs to nowhere. This consciousness is the main cause of his psychological trauma. He runs away, traveling for fifteen years like a mad dog without any purpose and without any destination. Freud reflects on his dichotomy and states: “Not only was the brain split into two functions but so was reality. Thus

people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes” (Freud 59).

In his fifteen years of his travel Joe Christmas tries to find his identity but he remains alien and an outsider. Faulkner comments thus: “He had once tricked or teased white men into calling him a negro in order to fight them, to beat them or be beaten; now he fought the negro who called him white...He lived with Negroes, shunning white people” (225). Laing observes that the main cause of trauma is the inner conflict in the life of a character. Joe is a man torn between black and white. He struggles to find acceptance with one group or another but no community is ready to accept him and he remains an outsider. This is the main cause of his frustration and depression. He remains upset for two years and feels inferior to whites. Faulkner explores his black consciousness thus: “At night he would lie in bed besides her, sleepless, beginning to breathe deep and hard” (Faulkner 226).

Joe has no option but to seek his but to seek his black identity. Joe comes to the conclusion that black thinking is different from the white thinking and ideas. Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden experience life in all its devastation. He begins a dysfunctional relationship with Joanna. She is in her forty who has lived her whole life on her family estate. Joanna Burden is also an outcast and lives in the margins between black and white societies. Joe’s Joanna relationship becomes a main focus in the novel. Joanna’s father taught her thus: “the curse of the black race is God’s curse...the curse of the white race is the black man who will be forever God’s chosen own because He once cursed him” (253). Joe’s relationship with Joanna is very ambiguous and Faulkner has depicted the rape scene thus: “And when he entered the house at night it was as he has entered it that first night; he felt like a thief, a robber, even while he mounted to the bedroom where she waited” (234). Despite his role as rapist Joe begins to feel that Joanna is still in charge of this sexual relationship. He is threatened by their relationship “It is like I was the woman and she was the man” (235). Interestingly, each time he walks up to Joanna’s room, she does not fight back. Instead, Burden truly is the puppet master behind the encounter. She gives him a false sense of control but she is the one that controls the environment. Even in their lovemaking Joanna constantly calls him a “negro” and finds sexual satisfaction in this role play. The fantasy

entails Joe playing the black, corrupted and vile rapist takes advantage of the weak white woman. So Joe decides to teach Burden a lesson.

The second phase of his identitarian trauma begins as he goes up to her room and attacks and rapes her. He feels anger at that the power she had over him and fights to take it back. As he thinks of himself as black he doesn't like that his race has allowed Burden to weaken and feminize him in their relationship. Joe says: "I'll show you! I'll show the bitch!" (236). He is amazed to find her at his cabin sitting on the cot. He realizes that she has surrendered to him as a woman and they sit and talk for hours. Caruth comments thus:

Trauma, in order to be psychic trauma, never comes simply from outside. That is, even in the first moment it must be internalized, and then afterwards relived, revived, in order to become an internal trauma. (Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma* 26)

Joe Christmas doesn't know what he is and why he is born. He doesn't realize that within his heart, he struggles for acceptance. When he realizes what it means to be Negro, he is scared that this is the life he is truly entitled "to the black life, the black breathing...compounded the substance of breathe so that not only voices but moving bodies and light itself became...with the now ponderable night inseparable and one" (114). When Lena becomes pregnant out of wedlock, she faces the wrath of the society and is treated as an immoral outcast. She suffers the first stroke of trauma as she feels depressed and alienated. Guilt ridden, she sets out on a journey to find the father of her child. "Walking slowly she goes with the shoes unlaced about her ankles, until she reached the top of the hill a mile beyond" (8). She is lonely and desperate; she struggles to find out the father of her baby alone. She battles with her unfortunate situations. Personal actions and schizoid behavior of an individual is the result of trauma according to Laing. Joe and Lena are treated as outcasts and both of them are the victims of depression and frustration resulting into their disintegration of self. Laing states that frustration and depression lead to "existential split "of an individual's psyche. Faulkner has depicted the roots of ontological insecurity in Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden" (22), Faulkner has described the struggle of Joanna's life that is

considered as an outcast by the community. She lives alone as a stranger and the victim of alienation.

Joe and Joanna suffer trauma because of their traumatic memorial events which started the toothpaste episode. He develops disdain toward women in a number of occasions including the prostitute Bobbie Alan and Joanna Burden. The experience with Bobbie Allen was tormenting for him. Joe is an “abandonment neurotic “because he doubts whether he can be loved as he, for he had cruel experience of being abandoned” (Fanon 77). He beats her when he learnt that she was having her period. Menstruation brings to his mind the scene of the dietician and its aftermath. Memory plays vital role in developing trauma in Joe to “see a diminishing row of suavely shaped urns in moonlight, blanched. And not one was perfect...there issued something liquid. He vomited” (189). Memory tortures Joe who is presented as ‘the victim literally dreams about and imaginatively returns to the experience that traumatized (Forster 267). Laing explains: “the schizoid individual fears real live dialectical relationship with real live people” (Laing 77). Laing observes that a traumatic character is schizoid and he lives in his own illusions. Joanna gives food to Joe who sticks to his back culture and believes that a black shouldn’t eat the food of the whites. Joanna knows that Joe is a nigger but she accepts him as her lover. Joanna believes that Joe is an object and her relationship with him is based on her illusions. Joe Christmas observes that she is “trying to be a woman and said she don’t know how” (99). Joanna doesn’t have high opinion of Joe who is dubbed as a rapist. He climbs on her window and enters into her bedroom like a thief and a robber. The images of Faulkner are very effective revealing the degradation of Joe. He enters into her bedroom “like a “thief, a robber, each time anew” (96). Joanna corrupts Joe as the plot progresses she corrupts his sexuality. She allows him to rape her while having sex with him. In “Faulkner’s *Light in August: A View of Tragedy*,” Ray B. West observes that “the tragedy of Joe is the tragedy of mankind” (10). Joe feels that he has been pushed into “the sewer” by Joanna. He feels that he is trapped in a “woman’s muck” (98) by the moon cycles of Joanna’s irrationality. Joanna’s true self is not shown but only the “two creatures that struggled in the only body” (106) is presented. Faulkner portrays the changed personality of Joanna, he changed appearance “prominently boned, long, a little thin, and almost manlike: in contrast to it her plump body was more richly and softly animal than ever” (108), merely echoes

Joanna's psychological state, that is "two creatures that struggled n one body" (106), since she is not pregnant, but menopausal. In this case, trauma is due to sexual knowledge. This kind of trauma happens according to Forter "too early" and "too late." The sexual trauma in Joanna is a source of her alienation and psychological tensions and depressions. Laing calls this as "a dread of being absorbed by the other." Laing claims thus:

It is felt as a risk in being understood in being loved, or even simply in being seen. To be hated may be feared for other reasons, but to be hated as such s often less disturbing than to be destroyed, as it is felt, through being engulfed by love. (Laing 44)

Joe looks as a person who looks white but who is suspected of having black blood was exposed to his racial reality. As a matter of fact, he felt culturally estranged because the Southern community" was avenging its traumatic past upon the newly estranged other subjects within" (Kuo 133), Joe describes her thus: "it was as though there were two people: the one whom he saw now and then by day and looked at while they spoke to one another" (Faulkner 96). Faulkner has described Joanna's personality and voice as "calm, a little deep, quite cold" (95). Joe sees Joanna as "calm, cold faced and combined priest and banker" (105). Faulkner has traced out the sexual development of Joanna and her "surrender is hard, pitying and almost manlike" with no "feminine vacillation, no coyness of obvious desire and intention to succumb at last" (97). A fatalistic calm settles in Joe as he enters into the Burden house for the final scene. "So no it's all done; all finished and enters the house through the kitchen, and mounts the stairs. Joanna demands that Joe kneel with her and pray for forgiveness. When he refuses, she threatens him with a "cap and-ball revolver" (212). When Joanna Burden tries to shoot Joe, her eyes are described as "calm and still as all pity and all despair, and all conviction" (247). Incense with rage, he slashes her throat with a razor. He sets the house with a fire and runs away.

Trauma is, therefore, a close and personal experience of a lethal event which can lead to the death of a victim. Trauma is something beyond the expectation and the acceptance of a subject. It comes immediately to an individual but exists in its psyche forever. Its frequency fluctuates within the mind and the body of its victim but it never leaves the casualty. At the end of the

novel she wants to kill Joe because he refuses to kneel and pray with her. Joanna is not successful in her mission and expresses her inner psychological trauma. Her end is very tragic as Joe cuts her throat with his razor in a savage manner. “She is found mutilated, with her head facing one side, her body the other, symbolizing her lifelong inner conflict which is not resolved even after her death. She dies as sexless” (114). Faulkner has depicted the history of identitarian trauma of Joe Christmas in the novel. He is a hybrid and this is the main cause of his psychological trauma. Joe Christmas suspects that his father is black and his mother is white. His “mixed blood” is the main cause of his alienation and isolation. The old memories become the main cause of his psychological trauma. The dietician passes derogatory remarks on Joe: “You little nigger bastard!” (52). The Dietician calls him a rat and a nigger. The derogatory images confuse Joe and disable his sexuality. The word “Nigger” haunts Joe throughout his life and in his adult life he remains restless trapped in the culture of marginalization. Joe is living with fractured identity. Non identity of Joe begins with “his social-alienation in the orphanage in which he lives until he is five, and where he is introduced to the concept of being nigger, the primary name by which the other children refer to him” (Bell 120). In his adult life, Joe’s sexual experience with an unknown black girl, waitress and the prostitute Bobbie involves violence which continues in his relationship with Joanna as well. Joe’s and Joanna’s tragic love story begins with violence and Joanna’s body is found in mysterious circumstances.

Joanna suffers from the gender trauma and psychological trauma caused by her paradoxical relationship with Joe. He resorts to scapegoating Joanna through decapitating her with a razor to put an end to his psychological trauma. In his novel *Light in August*, Faulkner has dramatized the trauma process that Joe Christmas has undergone. The ending adds to Joe’s tragic quest of identity since the plot reveals that Percy Grimm takes revenge upon the murder of Joanna through castrating Joe with a butcher knife. Joe Christmas rejects his community and travels from city to city to escape the inner conflict. He is neither accepted by the white community nor by the black community. So he belongs to nowhere.

To conclude, Faulkner’s *Light in August* depicts Joe’s quest for identitarian trauma. Faulkner gives an insight into the cultural and psychological trauma suffered by the major characters of

Faulkner. Joe Christmas, Joanna Burden and Lena Grove suffer alienation, dissociation of mind and psychological trauma. Joanna is an outcast and so is Joe Christmas. Lena Grove is lonely and desperate because her lover has deserted her. The novel depicts the journey of Joe Christmas and he struggles to seek his identity. Joanna suffers the psychological trauma because of her alienation in the white community. Her relationship with Joe brings her downfall as he kills her in desperation with a view to take revenge from the white society.

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