Articulation and Mediation of Trauma in the Indigenous Memoir *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*

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Life narratives as expressions of self and lived experiences play a significant role in negotiating a traumatic past. Articulation of traumatic experience through memories has a therapeutic effect. Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia edited by Anita Heiss is a collection of 52 memoirs written by aboriginal authors which distinctly articulate aboriginal life in Australia. The memoir is investigated as an attempt at mediation of trauma. The anthology institutes a correlation between the individual and the group with collective trauma as the point of reference. The concept of transhistorical trauma is functional in reading these memoirs. Trauma as manifested in aboriginal life is studied with emphasis on the concepts of memory and identity.

Keywords: Trauma, Life writing, Transgenerational trauma, Identity.

Human mind is profoundly perturbed by traumatic experiences. Trauma can be the consequence of either a sudden incident or a long term experience. Memories of trauma can be complex and fragmented making articulation exigent. Recollecting or narrating traumatic experiences could be more harrowing and daunting than the incident or experience itself. However, articulation facilitates traumatic healing considerably. In Judith Herman's words, "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them

aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (11). Life writing is a remarkable genre that confers the narrator with a medium to articulate, negotiate and survive trauma. Leena Kurvet Kaosaar suggests:

> These include but are not limited to ways of coming to terms with and coping with traumatic experience on individual and collective level and the healing that writing autobiographically about traumatic experience can bring about, reassessment and revision of historical knowledge and cultural memory and the relationship between the private and the public and participating in social action concerning legislation and policymaking. (305)

One noteworthy attempt at compiling the self reflective voices of indigenous Australians is *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia* edited by Anita Heiss. Also known as Australian First Nations, they are people who belonged to the ethnic groups that lived in Australia before colonization. The community consists of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia. Currently, they form 3% of Australia's total population. As representatives of a minority community ostracized by the mainstream society, they have collective experiences of trauma. The long struggle put up by the aboriginals won them certain legal rights, for example, equal pay. Intense traumatic experiences like bullying, segregation, etc., distress them in a severe manner, leading to identity crisis and sometimes, suicides. Indigenous people run the risk of experiencing severe trauma, nearly four times than the non-Indigenous population (Haskell & Randall, 2009). Human history is replete with instances of collective trauma. Slavery, imperialism, racism, war, holocaust etc are global phenomena that engraved the human psyche with mortal pain and suffering. Individual responses to traumatic life experiences may vary significantly, yet the common thread of fear, shame, horror, and hurt unifies these subjective responses scattered across time and space. Individual trauma transmutes into collective trauma and is passed on from one generation to the next, with the young generation partaking in the suffering of their ancestors. This inheritance of collective disgrace and hurt defines their group consciousness: "Cultural trauma occurs when members of the collectivity 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" (Alexander 1). The 52 memoirs in the anthology explicate the collective nature of trauma experienced by the community. Gilad Hirschberger defines: "The term collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect a historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people" (9).

Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia (2018) is an anthology consisting of fifty two autobiographical writings by various writers. Published by Black Inc, this book received the 2019 Small Publishers' Adult Book of the Year award. Through this anthology, the author seeks to gather the diverse voices and experiences of being an aboriginal. Contributors to the volume hail from varied milieu and the content therein is of considerable depth. Despite their milieu, the distressing experiences they suffer remain similar, yet in varied modes. Along with enlightening general readers on aboriginal traumatic life, the anthology motivates aboriginal identities towards self assertion and autonomy. The narrative explicates the impact of racism and stereotyping in the daily lives of the Aboriginal community. The contributors include famous personalities as well as new authors. Tony Birch, Deborah Cheetham, Adam Goodes, Terri Janke, Patrick Johnson, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Jack Latimore, Celeste Liddle, Amy McQuire, Kerry Reed-Gilbert, Miranda Tapsell, Jared Thomas, Aileen Walsh, Alexis West, Tara June Winch are some among the contributors of the anthology. Some of the authors met with disapproval because of their skin colour. Those who appeared white were questioned about their identity. Many of them were humiliated in public because of their aboriginal identity and were called names. Sometimes, the discrimination extended to physical attack. Most of the authors illustrated childhood experiences of discrimination and humiliation. A perfect rendering of a segregated world of aboriginal and non-aboriginal Australians is perceptible in the anthology. Reflecting real life experiences of injustice and oppression can be interpreted as a method of adding to the aboriginal historical canon.

Anita Heiss in the introduction to *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia* notes that despite individual experiences, there are numerous communal connections and shared experiences that fame common themes, such as the importance and influence of identity, the stolen generations, family, education, and concepts of country and place. (v) One common struggle encountered by aboriginal people is identity crisis. Misconceptions about colour and ethnicity lead to ambivalence and a subsequent questioning of one's racial identity. The general delusion about aboriginals being dark-skinned placed the white-skinned aboriginals in a compromising situation. Their identity as an aboriginal was repeatedly questioned. Bebe Backhouse shares his experience: "Fair-skinned Aboriginal people are questioned about- and doubted in regard to- their 'authenticity', with comments such as, 'But you don't look Aboriginal?' As something I've faced my whole life, I questioned myself constantly" (33).This predicament is shared and articulated by many writers of the compilation. Identity crisis is one common struggle apparent among the community. The significance of the community and the marginalized members is called into question. Alice Eather talks about her poem on the theme of identity, which she identifies as a huge issue in the aboriginal context, one which mutates into racist tensions: "The poem is about the struggle of being in between black and white" (149). Identification with others who share similar experiences of segregation and oppression proves to be therapeutic to the wounded soul. In "Two Tiddas", Alice Anderson talks about her aboriginal housemate who had a similar story to tell. "That makes me think just how many stories there would be across the country. And it makes me feel less alone and less insignificant" (12). The multiplicity of voices and modes of enunciation are made apparent in these memoirs. Caruth claims:

> There is no single approach to listening to the many different traumatic experiences and histories we encounter, and that the irreducible specificity of traumatic stories requires in its turn the varied responses- response of knowing and of acting- of literature, film, psychiatry, neurobiology, sociology, and political and social activism. (ix)

The marginalization faced by the community today is largely based on misunderstandings. Sharon Kingaby writes about her childhood experiences in deep agony, "When the (it seems) whole world thinks your people are 'worthless alcoholics and a throwback to the Stone Age', it's not the easiest thing for a child to try to dispute" (262). The need to explicate their culture to affirm their identity is an exasperating ordeal for an aboriginal. One such memory is recorded by Mathew Lillyst in "Recognised":

> Given that the audience was predominantly non- Aboriginal, she gave a general outline of Aboriginal culture. We are a proud culture. We have a strong connection to the land, our mother. We all have different songs and dances. We are not all drunk and troublesome. We don't all stand on a rock with one leg up and a spear in our hand. (304-305)

The traumatic life episodes are transferred to subsequent generations of the indigenous community. The concept of transgenerational trauma that defines personal as well as cultural identity is apparent in these memoirs. According to studies in psychology, transgenerational trauma is passed on to the future generation through parenting practices, behavioural problems etc. For instance, a parent who had suffered childhood abuse may have hyper vigilance and anxiety disorders concerning her child. This can make the child feel restricted thus leading to trauma. In the context of *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, one reason for transgenerational trauma is the replication of the social circumstances. In "Abo Nose", Zacharay Penrith Puchalski narrates an event where he was awfully tormented by a racist remark made by his best friend's boyfriend and her silence on the matter. "When I got home and explained to my parents what had happened, they seemed well versed in this exact experience" (363). The incident is an indication of identical social circumstances in consecutive generations that culminate in personal trauma. Michelle Balaev discusses about transgenerational trauma and the transfer of personal trauma into transhistorical trauma.

> Collective trauma is passed down to individuals in multifarious and refracted ways. Some lives are hit with catastrophic trauma over

> and over again; then trauma, with its concomitant strategies of survival, becomes a chronic condition. Defenses and denial become second nature; traumatic repetition becomes second nature. (Schwab 42)

A whole community is doomed to accept trauma as their everyday reality. Distinct experiences suggesting transgenerational trauma are evident in the work. Amy McQuire describes an incident that happened while she was an infant. Since she was fair skinned, her dad was questioned by a stranger whether it was his baby. It was an enquiry to ensure whether the baby was kidnapped, but it hurt him deeply. The daughter also has a traumatic life but in a different way, "feeling black but looking white" (Heiss 316). Even when right to life is guaranteed by law, these people find it hard to lead a peaceful life.

The resolution of traumatic memories can result in healing. One method of resolution is through representation of subdued voices and experiences. Confronting the memories through recall and articulation proves to be beneficial in the mediation of trauma. "Narrative reconstruction of traumatic experience is the central component of psychoanalytic therapeutic practice that is geared toward assisting the process of integrating traumatic memory into the survivor's life story" (Herman 175). The act of recreating the distressing past aids in the reconstruction of the thwarted self. Suzette A. Henke introduces the term scriptotherapy that refers to the therapeutic potential of writing. She explains the process as "writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment" (xii). Life writings hold a cathartic prospect to "reassess the past and to reinterpret the intertextual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by society and culture" (xv). Life writing as a self reflective genre promotes reconstitution of identity, which is rather complex and fragmented in the case of indigenous people. The emotional directness of this mode of writing is hard to achieve in any other genre. The representations of the traumatic past enhance liberation from the memories. "It proceeds via stages of representation, reflection and detachment from the past that are vital for the process of both individual and collective healing" (Jensen 6).

Kate Douglas analyses the autobiographical element in Sylvia Frazer's text *My Father's House* (1987) and points out that "displays of resilience and recovery are evident throughout the autobiographical project" (109). In *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, a sense of hope and positivity is noticeable towards the end of many memoirs. The determination of the authors to embrace their identity and heritage despite the contempt from society is an insinuation of overcoming trauma. Some of the narrators tried to conceal their identity or joined the racist jokes for social acceptance in the initial stages. But later they realized the significance of establishing their identity without regard to mainstream prejudices. Puchalski in his memoir states, "Identity is a strong word when you've had to fight hard to keep one. It took five years of questioning myself to get to who I am now- I can't let it go" (Heiss 366). Most of the writers were unaware of their heritage and history. The discriminating experiences in life triggered the search for roots. It took a long time for many of them to come to terms with their unique identity. They identify the past experiences as turning points that shaped their present self. Wolheim in his essay *On Persons and their Lives* emphasizes the therapeutic quality of autobiographical writings by mentioning its capability for personal identity formation of the narrator. "Autobiography…is poised between the writing and the rewriting of a life; and a life may be rewritten so as to impart to that life a unity that it never had – that is, malignly; or it may be rewritten benignly – that is, so as to achieve, even at alate hour, some reconciliation with the past" (Wolheim 315).

Aspects of recovery are visible in many memoirs of the collection. Melanie Williams relates how she was tormented because of her grey colour, neither white nor black. She was called names and even ridiculed at times. She had to defend her pride in the culture and heritage she was a part of. "Each taunt and slur cut deep and at times I found myself gasping for air, scared and alone in my big grey world" (Heiss 329). With age, she could appreciate her identity.The narrative ends with a remark on the beauty of colours and the acceptance that she will remain the same forever. "The recognition of trauma is crucial because it gives name and shape to a form of experience that is a rupturing of the capacity to make sense of the world" (Heiss 5). Anita

Heiss also identifies the anthology as "one of strength and resilience, of pride and inspiration, demonstrating the will to survive and the capacity to thrive against the odds" (vi).

Kaosaar talks about the transgressive prospect of life writing "to function as an alternative space for coming to terms with traumatic experience by facilitating a process of knowledge-building that also has the capacity to heal" (308). It has the ability to be the voice of the underprivileged and creates a substitute space for surviving trauma. Heiss highlights the relevance of creating new conversations about aboriginality in this collection, "The goal is to break down stereotypes-many of which are identified within these pages-and to create a new dialogue with and about Aboriginal Australians" (vi). Moreover, the self narratives offer an opportunity for the readers to identify with the stories, thus projecting the facet of collective remembering. Nancy Mairs, in *Waist-High in the World: A Life among the Nondisabled* tries to indoctrinate the disabled readers about the importance of a respectable life even in the face of losses. Through the mode of self expression, the author tries to establish a meaning to the life engraved by sufferings. Henke quotes Shoshana Felman, "a surrogate transferential process can take place through the scene of writing that allows its author to envisage a sympathetic audience and to imagine a public validation of his or her life testimony" (vi).

Childhood experiences are the most awful for most of the writers. The inherent aspect of subjection in a child transforms the situation into a highly dreadful one. Celeste Liddle illustrates her childhood experience of being called 'black bum' in school. She describes that even today those two words "burn in my memory" (Heiss 290). The consequences of these detrimental experiences of childhood are determinative of the child's character and future. Liddle believes her introvert behavior as the product of lack of social interaction during school days. Her words symbolize the experiences of majority of aboriginal children in Australia, "Overall, those younger years just left me distressed about an identity that I continually had to defend, but had a limited vocabulary to draw on in order to do so. It was also an isolating experience; I mainly felt as if I was alone and my teachers didn't understand" (Heiss 293). Framing these episodes

into a narrative is a promising way to understand oneself that leads to liberation from traumatic memories. In Kaplan's opinion, the victims negotiate their trauma through writing "to organize pain into a narrative that gives shape for the purpose of self understanding (working their trauma through), or with the aim of being heard, that is, constructing a witness where there was none before" (20).

Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia is an attempt to coalesce multiple narrative voices of trauma. Collective and transgenerational traumatic elements are discernible in the book. Self reflective writing of traumatic events propounds a conciliation of a traumatic past. Reintegration of the self as part of emancipation from the haunting memories is a positive outcome of this mode of writing. Resilience and recovery are the marked features of autobiographical narrations of trauma, which is conspicuous in these memoirs. Indigenous people are still sidelined by the mainstream society on the basis of prejudices, colour, ancestry etc. The outsider's perception of the indigenous life remains inadequate in several aspects. Representation of the trivial incidents that had immense impact on the person's psyche suggests the everyday traumatic incidents. The self reflective writings act as a space for surviving childhood experiences of pain and hurt. Liberation from hurtful memories through writing is achieved in the genre. The anthology calls for more critical readings because of the relevant concerns they address.

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