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The Writing Cure: Combating Trauma in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

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Abstract

Writing has proven to be a useful method for preserving and re-preserving memories. A traumatised person's life is intricately woven with his or her prior recollections. These memories influence how individuals view the world and are triggered by circumstances that bring back recollections of their trauma. If the repressed memory is not adequately processed, these triggers could keep becoming harmful to the person and those around him. The "writing cure" technique can help here by providing a secure setting for the traumatised person to process their traumatic memories. The article focuses on Maya and Celie, two incest victims who utilise writing as a way to express their otherwise unutterable grief. The purpose of the article would be to illustrate the necessity for and function of writing as a therapeutic tool by examining the stories of these two people.

Keywords: Traumatic Memory, Writing Cure, Expressive Writing, Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy

Introduction: “Words are things, I’m convinced... Someday we’ll be able to measure the power of words.” - **Maya Angelou**

Spoken word has much power, so much so that it brought life to a once-dead earth. According to the Bible, the formless, empty and dark earth was illuminated, the moment God ‘spoke’: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen 1:3). It was as if the word inside Him was

waiting to spring out of His mouth at His command. And with the word, there was light; with the light, the shapeless was brought to shape and the void was filled. Thus, all things were made through a single spoken word, bringing the earth into being. Spoken words are thus a crucial part of this world since its genesis. Thoughts conceived in the human heart and mind find their expression through spoken words. But what does one do when he/she is bereaved of speech? Here is a story of two girls who stopped speaking and resorted to writing after being subjected to terrific trauma – one is Maya, the protagonist of the autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and the other is Celie, the protagonist of the novel *The Color Purple*. The aim of this article is to explore the many benefits of writing in the life of a traumatised individual, through a careful observation of these characters pertaining to the incidents that revolve around the abuse. By doing so, it will also discover the magical power of written words to liberate the victim's voice, knocking down muteness. Maya and Celie, both undergo a similar kind of trauma, i.e., incest. Maya is being raped by her mother's boyfriend Mr. Freeman, who is a father figure to her; Celie's plight comes from her father Alphonso, who she later discovers to be her step-father. Unable to process the events as young girls, both Maya and Celie turn mute. Muteness was more of a coping mechanism for them than a choice. Maya stops speaking from age 7.5 to 12. She says, "In my case I was saved in that muteness." Unlike Maya's muteness, Celie's ordeal was more of a forced muteness. Male patriarchy simply prohibits her from expressing her opinion, and therefore she turns into herself for survival. She expresses this fight for survival in the following words: "But I don't

know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker, 1983, p. 18). Both these characters convey their lost hope in the power of their spoken words through their choice of an alternate mode of expression, i.e., written words. One difference between them is that, while Maya writes years after the abuse, Celie writes during the abuse; during the abuse or after the abuse, their writing exercise serve as a therapeutic tool for both of them.

Objective of the Paper: To present the various emotions of the protagonists as traumatised children, expressed through their writing, and to establish the role of writing in the healing process.

Abreaction technique: Mental healing begins with the victim “opening up” about the traumatic incidents deep buried in them. For the supernatural to meet the natural, the stone that lays against the tomb of Lazarus has to be taken away. Vulnerability is appreciated when it comes to the healing process. There might be valid reasons for the victim to rather keep the pain shut than to unlock it; they might be too embarrassed of the stench that could be released if it is laid open. Therefore, they choose to ignore the trauma and move on with their lives as if they don’t exist. “It is normal for their brain to dissociate and create another person to handle the pain and trauma” (Walker, 1983, p. 59). They would be comfortable inside the mask they have put on, unwilling to set themselves free. But this is definitely not the best solution in the long run. These old images, along with the pain associated with them, are evoked under particular conditions. They show up automatically in the situations that reminds them of their original trauma. The victims would be triggered to react in a way that they should not, to the ones that are in no way associated with their

trauma. This mechanism by which traumatic memory is produced is called “restitutio ad integrum”. With the recollection of one element of a traumatic experience, all the other elements are evoked automatically. Thus, the act of burying down painful emotions can only cause them further damage by affecting their relationship with others. But once the victim is ready to take the stone away, it is the miracle that would be released, not the stench. Psychotherapy uses the term “abreaction” to denote the practice of releasing repressed emotions through the victim’s verbalization of traumatic memories. This theory advocates the adverse health effects caused by keeping the traumatic memories suppressed or out of consciousness; it also suggests the recovery of those memories through various techniques that promote the release. Psychologist Janet claims that “transforming perceptual-level memories into cohesive narrative accounts would mitigate the unhealthy effects of traumatic experiences” (Lepore, 2006, p. 4). “Talking cure” is one technique that serves as an emotional outlet to the victim. This term was coined by Josef Breuer’s patient Bertha Pappenheim. She refers to this verbal therapy as “chimney-sweeping”. Scientifically, talking exercise has significant health benefits on the patients. James Pennebaker, the author of the ground breaking work *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (1997) says, “If you can get people to talk or write about their problems, their health improves” (Pennebaker, 1997, p. 25). In a counselling set up, the major role of a therapist is to give the patient time and space to express themselves, i.e., to talk, cry, shout or write. The following is an excerpt from the book *Brave Surrender* to

help the readers understand how a counselling session works:

Teresa began our session.... She asked me simple questions.... And then she asked me a strange question: “Would anybody else like to speak?” What kind of crazy question is that? I thought. What does it even mean? But to my surprise, I answered her. In fact, I shouted. “I am so angry....” The voice was my own, and at the same time it wasn’t me. It felt as though I was outside of my body for a moment and someone else was responding. I didn’t say much after that. When the session ended, I felt bewildered and a little embarrassed. However, Teresa assured me I was definitely okay and not losing my mind. (Walker-Smith, 2019, p. 58) Talking sessions, thus bring the deep buried emotions to the surface, eventually bringing about a total integration. With all the benefits that this method holds, there are also certain shortcomings that compels the victim to look for a better option. The “talking cure” is limited owing to various social constraints and personal inhibitions. These barriers could be overcome by writing, as it provides a method to express thoughts and feelings anywhere and anytime without any social repercussions. In addition to drawing on traumatic life experiences as a source of inspiration, poets and novelists for centuries have viewed writing as a way of transforming trauma and healing themselves and others (DeSalvo, 1999). Expressive writing techniques also are not new to the therapeutic community. Ira Progoff (1977) popularized “journaling” as a method of psychic healing decades ago. Today, writing assignments are often given as “homework” in the context of ongoing psychotherapy.” (Lepore, 2006, p. 6) **Incest – an**

Inexpressible Evil: Incest, especially a forced one, is an unsayable evil. Psychologists call it “a secret trauma” or a “speechless terror”. The sexual mistreatment Maya faces is primarily emotion-based. Mr. Freeman is described as a man simply waiting for Mother (Ms. Vivian Baxter): He “put his whole self in the waiting...He waited. That was all” (Angelou, 1984, p. 77). He had to wait for her because she was always on the go. In other words, Mr. Freeman’s sexual urges had to be suppressed until Mother comes home. In such a setting, Maya seemed an alternate choice for him. She becomes his surrogate partner, satisfying his sexual needs. Adding to this, he was also overcome with the “sluggish inferiority of old men married to younger women” (Angelou, 1984, p. 75). His inability to control her moves and to keep up with her youthful pace is a good reason for the rage that might have been developed inside him. In fact, Maya feels sorry for him as is he was a “helpless pig” (Angelou, 1984, p. 78) fattened for the slaughter. Therefore, his act was also an offshoot of his long conceived rage. Rage-based incestuous acts prove more dangerous to the victim as the perpetrator would be hostile and overly sadistic. On the other hand, the abuse that Celie lives through is aggression-based. And this aggression is fuelled by Pa’s view of women as inferior gender. His desire to keep her under his thumb both physically and mentally, is vented out through his act of sexual violation. In both these cases, the victims are compelled by their perpetrators to keep the abuse secret. Mr. Freeman threatens Maya saying, “If you ever tell anybody what we did, I’ll have to kill Bailey” (Angelou, 1984, p. 80). Celie is warned in a similar way, “You better not never tell anybody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker, 1983, p.

3). The readers could find the same pattern repeated in both these cases, i.e., the abusers touch the emotional side of the victims by putting the lives of the persons they dearly love at risk – Bailey and Mammy. Although this was the first secret that Maya ever had to keep from Bailey, she does so to protect his life. Even after Mr. Freeman moved out of the house, Maya reasons within herself whether or not to share the abuse with the two persons in her sight – Mother and Bailey: “Could I tell her now? The terrible pain assured me that I couldn’t....If Mr. Freeman was gone, did that mean Bailey was out of danger? And if so, if I told him, would he still love me?” (Angelou, 1984, p. 87). Above all, she falls into complete muteness after she felt that her words killed a man. In her book, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, Laurie Vickroy refers to psychiatrist Alice Miller, who notes that trauma victims who are most damaged, “are those who are unable or prevented from voicing their anger or pain” (29). Celie blindly follows Pa’s words, i.e., to convey her emotions to God. She chooses writing as a means to reach God. Little did Pa know that his own evil advice will one day liberate Celie from the damages he and others have caused her?

Expressing Naivety:

During the initial stages of the abuse, both Maya and Celie are confused as to what is happening to them. Their naivety is expressed through the way their guileless brain try to make sense of the trauma. It is their innocence that makes them too ready to believe or trust other people. While Mr. Freeman threatens to kill Maya’s brother if she tells about the abuse, she questions in her childhood innocence, “What

have we done? We?” (Angelou, 80). Mr. Freeman’s act was not just a threat to Maya’s physical body, but also to her childhood innocence. Likewise, Celie begins her letter to God with a request, “Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (Walker, 1983, p. 3). From a psychological standpoint, it is this naivety of the victims that acts as the reason behind their passivity during the abuse. “In her study of thirty-seven incestuously victimized children, Gligor (1966) found that 67% of them were passive throughout the victimization and that 12% of them appeared to have willingly participated in the incest” (Young, 57). From a narratological standpoint the authors’ choice of words to bring out the naivety of the victimised children could evoke the sympathy of the readers upon them. It could be seen as a narrative technique to win the reader’s side, used by the victim who is otherwise at a risk of being unreasonably blamed for having stayed passive.

Expressing Pain:

Sexual violation causes debilitating effects on the victims, both during and after the abuse. Maya expresses this pain in a nutshell: “Then there was pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot” (Angelou, 1984, p. 84). This pain is not just of the physical body, but it permeates to the soul and mind as well. This is a kind of pain that appears and reappears at every reminiscence of the original incident. Maya’s very account of the pain years after the abuse is a proof of the indelibility of the pain. Maya is expected to

erase this pain and to return to her normal state when the doctor announces her healed, which she simply could not. The pain was like a lump in her throat, suffocating her words. She in turn turns into an addictive behaviour of muteness. Improperly treated or untreated pain can thus turn the survivors towards addictive behaviours: “Seventy to 80 percent of victims cope with a shattered sense of self by medicating their pain with alcohol or drugs. In fact, untreated sexual abuse is a main predictor of relapse in chemical dependency recovery. Other addictive behaviors include socially acceptable ones like workaholism or codependency, which is focusing on others in an unhealthy way” (Ferree, 3). Pain could also cause serious mental implications such as depression, Bi-polar disorder, and other post-traumatic stress symptoms. Celie is forced to “better shut up and git used to it” (Walker, 1983, p. 3) when she cries out of the pain (of penetration). But she says, “I don’t never git used to it” (Walker, 1983, p. 3). The only thing she can do about the pain is to write about it, which does not help her much at that point of time. As this untreated pain is carried into every part of her life, she ends up being in a sensual relationship with Shug. In other words, Celie’s addiction was Shug Avery, which is of course unhealthy. The very essence of both these stories is “pain”, and it is through written words that the authors express them. The nature of this pain is that, spoken words often fail to make it understandable or intelligible to the listeners. Also, the victims would have had no safe place to open up about their pain during the abuse. Thus, the victims’ want for listening ears is replaced by the supply of reading minds.

Expressing Helplessness:

The victim feels helpless with the perpetrator's power over them. In Maya's case, Mr. Freeman has an emotional power over her. Maya begins her novel with the words "I didn't come to stay" (Angelou, 1984, p. 3), which signifies the instability she faced as a child. She was a displaced individual, both emotionally and physically. It was her sense of emotional displacement that makes her heart long for a "home", which she finds in Mr. Freeman's embrace. She was so enamoured with the new feeling that this act offered, that she ends up wanting more. Mr. Freeman uses this to manipulate her feelings so as to use her body more. Maya's state of helplessness is presented when he asks her, "You liked it before, didn't you?" (Angelou, 1984, p. 84). On the other hand, the power Pa has over Celie is mostly physical. As discussed earlier, Pa was an misogynist who treated women as "objects". His heartless treatment of Celie is exposed in the following lines: "He never had a kine word to say to me. Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't" (Walker, 1983, p. 3). Celie couldn't help but to feel sorry for herself. Perhaps both these narrators might have sought help from their writing exercise for their otherwise helpless selves; Maya, recounting the incident after so many years, has now got a perfect understanding of the events that led to her ordeal, which in turn liberates her from the cage of inappropriate guilt and shame. "Writing is not a perfect therapy, but it fosters self-understanding and self-control, thus combating feelings of helplessness" (Berman, 1999, p. 50).

Expressing Callousness: Sexually traumatised children exhibit symptoms of dysphoria, characterised by "diminished responsiveness to the external world" (Bloom & A. Henke,

2009, p. 112). The world becomes black and white to them adjoined by a lack of motivation to involve in the normal activities. They would be invisible strangers to their own selves. Though physically alive, they feel dead emotionally. Episodes of damage and pain numb their hearts to a stone: A stone is dead. You can find no feeling in it. Talk to it; it will shed no tears of pity, though you recount to it the saddest tales; no smiles will gladden it, though you should tell it the most happy story. It is dead; there is no consciousness in it; prick it and it will not bleed; stab it and it cannot die, for it is dead already. (Spurgeon) Maya withdraws from the external world after the trauma and welcomes loneliness. She creeps into the barren and obscure cocoon of stamps. The “barrenness” and “obscurity” are symbolic of Maya’s present condition. Barrenness is a state where nothing could be produced owing to the dryness of the soil. Maya, through her writing, recalls her refusal to speak, almost for four continuous years following the trauma. Celie, on the other hand, expresses her callousness through her inadvertent acceptance of her condition. At one point in the novel she expresses her inability to cry anymore (Walker, 1983, p. 14).

Expressing Culpability

It is common for the incest victims to feel responsible for their trauma. Maya comes to a conclusion that “what he did to me, and what I allowed, must have been very bad if already God let me hurt too much” (Angelou, 1984, p. 87). “Any gratification that the child is able to glean from the exploitative situation becomes proof in her mind that she instigated and bears full responsibility for the abuse” (Bloom & A. Henke, 2009, p. 112). Celie feels she was “just born

that way” (Walker, 1983, p. 23) for others to use and abuse her. By saying so, she shifts the blame on herself. She regains her identity an individual when releases her anger through her voice. It is interesting to note that this turn of events happen when she begins to read Nettie’s letters, i.e., written words. That was the first time she expresses her feelings to someone. It was as if the power connected to the written words propelled her into becoming a new being altogether.

Maya’s first life line comes in the form of a woman named Mrs. Bertha Flowers. In Maya’s words, she is the “aristocrat of Black Stamps” (101). It is Mrs. Flowers who helps Maya to break out of her muteness by using her love for literature as a catalyst. She plays a major role in Maya’s recovery. Here is her five-line mantra that changed Maya’s perspective on speech:

‘Your grandmother says you read a lot.

Every chance you get.

That’s good, but not good enough.

Words mean more than what is set down on paper.

It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning.’ (p. 106)

Mrs. Flowers also suggests Maya to read books aloud. Not only does she suggest it, but she also shows her how to do it. She opens the first page of *A Tale of Two Cities*, and Maya hears poetry for the first time in her life. Her reading was a wonder in her ears. She bids her goodbye with a note that she must hear her recite the next time. The way Mrs. Flowers

treated Maya had made an impact on her that she says, “I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson’s grandchild or Bailey’s sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson” (p. 109). Maya, following Mrs. Flowers’ advice, uttered the words from a poetry book and heard the poems come alive from her own lips. The beauty of the poetry coming from her own lips broke the silence. She began to speak again. And when she freed her voice it grew powerful enough to move and inspire millions.

Conclusion

A caged bird has to unlearn and learn certain things simultaneously in order to break itself free. Writing is an effective tool for the traumatised victims to unearth the incidents that continue to chain their movements, even years after the occurrence: “Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often to in order to complete it” (Caruth et al., 1995, p. 176). Maya had to unlearn the lie that her voice was responsible for Mr. Freeman’s death, and learn the fact that her words have the power to construct her life for the better; Celie had to unlearn what her society says about women, and learn the truth that she is not destined to be under a man’s thumb and that she can speak out. The feelings that they expressed through their writing ultimately bring them to this point of truth. Both Maya and Celie represent women who would not settle for less; they were so determined to thrive that they would not choose the path

already set out for them. Instead, they gradually recover their speaking voice using their writing voice as a tool. Thus achieving freedom from every chain, they continue to inspire millions of readers towards the same.

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